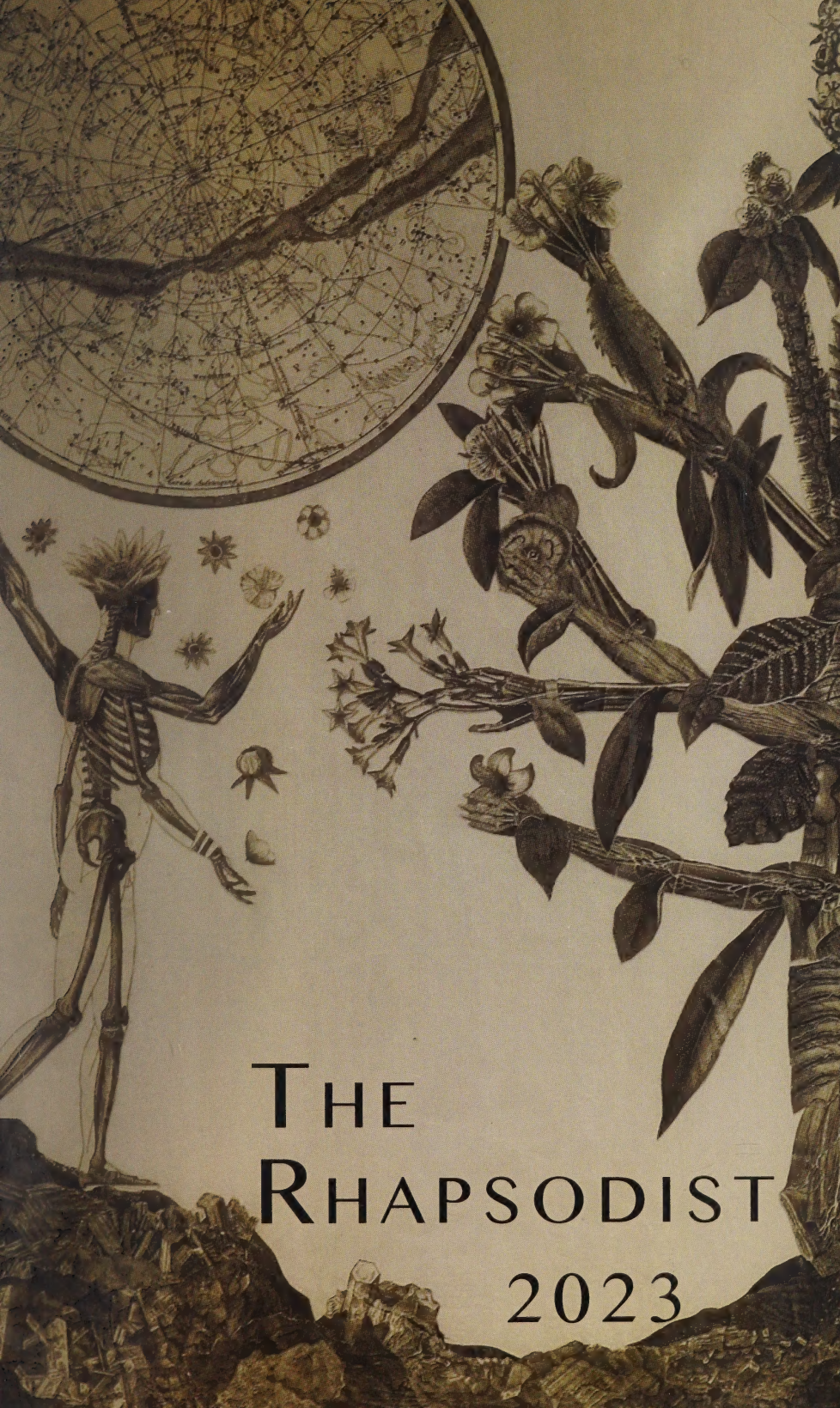
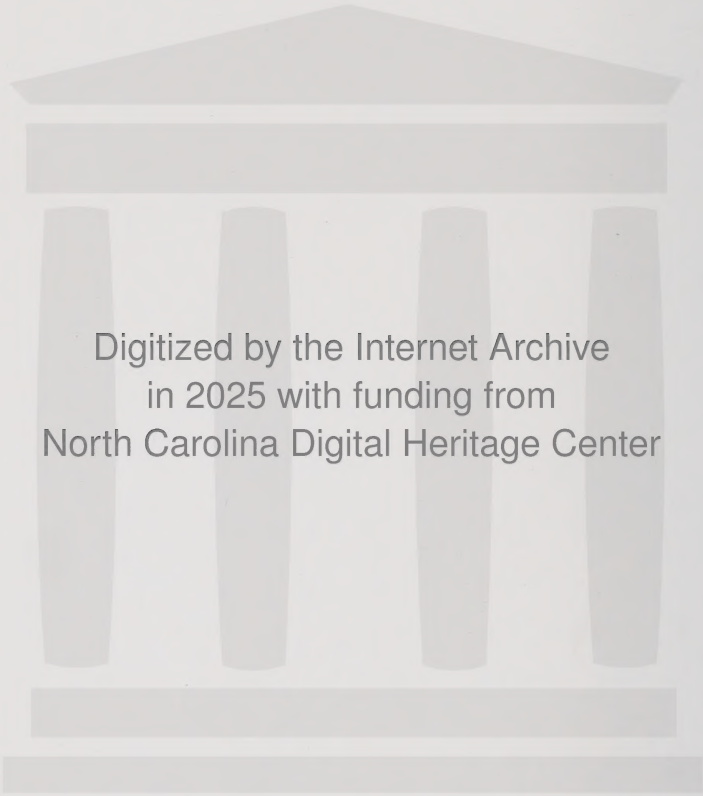


THE RHAPSODIST

2023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The Rhapsodist

Spring 2023

Asheville-Buncombe Technical Community College
Asheville, NC

Editors

Barbie Byrd
Ben Latter
Franklin Miller
Erik Moellering

Readers

Kenet Adamson
Jennifer Browning
Chelsea Patterson
Maggie Poist
Beverly Williamson
Lisa York

Design/Layout

The Rhapsodist Editors
with assistance from
Porscha Orndorf & Dave Kareken

rhapsodist, n.

Pronunciation: Brit. /'rapsĕd ist/ , U.S. /'ræpsĕdist/
Etymology: < rhapsody n. + -ist suffix. Compare French rhapsodiste ...

1. A collector of miscellaneous literary pieces. Now hist. and rare.

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A-B Tech's Student Services Department

Editors' Note:

"You think your pain and your heartbreak are unprecedented in the history of the world, but then you read. It was books that taught me that the things that tormented me most were the very things that connected me with all the people who were alive, who had ever been alive."

—James Baldwin

Dear Reader,

As A-B Tech's primary venue for literature and fine art, *The Rhapsodist* showcases the best examples of creative expression from our college's diverse population. We hope you enjoy this year's issue of writing and art that connects us with the most vital aspects of all those who have come before us. Thank you for your continued support of *The Rhapsodist*.

Baldwin, James, Television Narrative about his life, WNEW-TV, New York City, 1 June, 1964.

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Untitled

Jack B. Clements

God I need to finish *King Lear.*
Instead of being here
Getting flashbacks to clear lighters,
Wave Blue 100's, and the fatty grease of deer.
Sometimes I'm queer.
Sometimes I'm not even here.

Dahlia Sunset

Jason Garrett Vickery

The Milk Farm

Clay N. Jones

This land is beautiful, and I am glad to own it. Flowers bloom throughout most of the year and the snows are forgiving. In the wide valley, we have a clear view of the horizon and watch the sun's progress from the first kiss on the tips of the grass to the illumination of the entire world. When the moon rises, the water in the earth follows it and mists fill the air. I am not superstitious but this is the time I always prefer to butcher, under the softer eye of the darkness.

My operation is small and I don't have to butcher much or often. The cows live and die simply and cleanly, but I do like to chat with them. And why should I lie to them in our final, unpleasant moments together? I have taken every care to prepare them for their final night. This is one of my techniques.

On nights of the dark moon I first spend my time in reflection. I sharpen the knife that I only use for this purpose. I choose three cows, two that I have spent time preparing and one who has never seen or smelled the blood of another. We go past the wide hill on the southmost side of my property to the dark green, windowless building that stands unseen for most of its existence. The youngest cow usually chatters, but when she asks why they are apart from the herd and where they are headed, the others politely, if haltingly, change the subject. I clean the killing house much more frequently than I use it, but there is something shadowy about the structure that I think only the animals can detect. They grow quiet when we are at its doors.

I respect my animals. Although they do not think and speak as we do, they are each individuals. But there is a pattern to how the youngest reacts as she realizes why she was pulled away

from sleep on one of the twelve darkest nights of the year, and I draw the eldest sister through the door. The eldest, even though I have spent months and months preparing her, even though she has stood in this house with me on many such nights, even though she has lost so many calves and has no more life to give the world anymore, tries to strike the Bargain with me again. With patience I have cultivated alongside this land, I coax her towards acceptance of what is to come, what must come. I don't tell her tales of a land in eternal summer beyond the sky. In my house of death, on my land, there is no god above me and I will not suffer a single lie. I do tell her she will join her children, her mother, and her mother's mother in a long sleep, and that she will never feel pain or loss again. She tends to accept this while we talk in the room with shadows I cannot see. Some cling to their life until their body and my patience is spent. It is only fair that I give them as much time as I can, and how can I blame them for fighting for more? This is simply the way of life, which I have learned: to fight as hard and as long as possible for its own existence. It is understandable and I cannot do anything but accept it.

The acts themselves are practiced to silky perfection, I've done this for many years now. One after the other, the first two cows step through a door they will never come out of. I have my talks with them, comfort them as I can, bind chains around their ankles, slice through the spine at the back of their necks, and hoist them up to drain them of their blood. It is instant if not painless. I clean the knife, but the scent of blood must still remain. The youngest is silent at the door, or she cries out to her sister for comfort and from fear of sharp blades in dark rooms. She begins to beg. She begs the stars, the clouds, the grasses, her mother, the cow gods and cow devils, and me, to only see the sun once again. She cries harder as she is pulled through the door.

The Bargain begins when I ask her why she cries. She tells me she does not want to die. I guide this talk in a slightly different direction than I do with the others. Since her sisters already hang

dead, bloodless, suspended from the rafters in another room, mercy can be afforded to her tonight, but I must guide her there carefully. I remind her of the quality of her life before this moment. Hasn't she had so many peaceful days in the sun? Hadn't she always been well fed, with a comfortable place to rest? You cows do not like to discuss it, but this is your fate and you all know it. It is why you are kept and sheltered and fed. It is not even unique to you, for all things must meet their end. She begs and begs, to see the sun and sky again and all of her friends in the field. She did not get to say goodbye. I tell her, truly, it is rare for anyone to get to say goodbye. I tell her, again, everything must die. Her death, and the death of her sisters, serves a greater purpose. Unlike the things that die in vain, just because, in the woods, in the ocean, on human streets, you all die painlessly and to feed our world. It is the human world that ensures she is so safe, sheltered, well-fed, and looked-after on my land.

Still she cries. It is understandable. She does not want to die. Nothing does.

After a while, I make her the offer: one more year. All life necessitates death, but I can do this for her. One more year. They all accept. At least, almost all of them did.

A few hours later, in the light of a fresh morning, I survey the herd from my homestead. I spy the youngest sister, rousing with the others. *Your prayer was answered, you see the sun once again. Isn't life so much sweeter after a brush with death, little one? This morning, how soft does the grass feel against your hooves? How warm is that first light of dawn?* The cows will not speak of last night amongst themselves, for livestock hates to talk about anything unpleasant.

For most of my girls, this will happen many times over the course of years. I bring them each to the killing house on several dark nights and offer them each one more year of life. Who can say I am not accommodating? I give them all as much time as I can afford. I show them the brink again and again. I guide them towards the

appreciation of all the time they have.

All I've done is business, and I've tried to make it as pleasant as possible for everything involved. There is certainly worse business out in the world, and bloodier farms. There are a lot of people who need to be fed. Satisfying constant need could be quite profitable. There is nothing wrong with that. Besides, I don't have to justify a thing. There is hunger in the world that I am able to satisfy. What I do is a service.

I witnessed an aberration in this pattern when Socks the cow was born, so named for her solid black coat ending in four white ankles and hooves. On the morning of her birth, she was heralded by an omen. In this valley we keep to the old ways of reading the symbols of the world. To see a bluebird perched in a pine is to know pain comes for dawn means luck will be on your side for the next week. In the hours before Socks came into the world, I saw a grey wolf running through the trees east of my property. It was highly unusual; they were thought to be extinct in these mountains and no one of repute had witnessed one for a decade. The old lore instructs that this omen, the lone wolf running through the trees, is of significance in your life but it is neutral: one of the Universe's rare coin flips. An unclear warning for good, ill, or neither.

So the running wolf marked the entrance of Socks onto my land, who was unique amongst her kin. She had some quiet watchfulness about her, and a strange keenness behind her eyes, as if the wolf had given her some gift of the predator as she was still moving through the passage between non-existence and life.

She grew up mostly the same as the rest. Maybe she took to language a little more quickly and played a little less than the others. Maybe I was not as attentive as I should have been, with the sign of the wolf hanging over her, but I have other responsibilities and calves grow up fast, as my colleagues say. She had her own first calf without complication. Unfortunately for a young cow her age, it was born male and could not remain with us. I rent bulls when I need

them and I do not bother with steers. I have my killing house, but my main product is milk, and I don't need any extra mouths to feed. Those get sold to the fellows who make veal (unpleasant business). I got my milk from her, and her son could not stay with us long. When the day for their separation came, she cried just as badly as any young mother, and she was comforted by her sisters. It happens to all of them, and they will heal. There will be new springs and new daughters in the future, she was assured, correctly. Sons were taken to live over the hill, somewhere else.

"No. I did not know this," she cried, even long after her calf was gone. "I did not know this."

She became all the more quiet after this, all the more watchful. Her eyes grew sharp to the point of strange brutality. This was strange to see in a cow, but I strive to accept them all for as they are, both the dull and the keen. And, one night, her time to go to the house under the dark moon eventually came.

It went mostly the same as the hundred similar nights before it. Socks talked a little with the other girls. Silence fell as we approached the killing house. The first sister had her appointment with me, and then the second. Socks stayed icily silent, her predatory eyes trained on the door. She did not cry or resist when I led her through the threshold, which I considered very unusual. Unbidden, I remembered the sign of her birth, the wolf running through the trees.

At first, I was unsure how to proceed with such a quiet charge, on one of the worst nights of her life. Usually the Bargain starts with the soothing of tears. Her eyes, calm, clear, sharp as the blade in my hand, were as watchful as ever. Fascinated, I searched for a different path.

"Do you know why you're here tonight, little one?"

"This is your killing house. Older sisters don't like to talk about it, but I'm good at listening. I am here to die."

I smiled a little at this. Such a confident answer! The life of

a farmer is enjoyable to me, but it had been such a long time since I had encountered such a novel problem. This would be an easy gift to give her. It should have been, at least.

"Are you so sure your time has come? If you've investigated so thoroughly, you might have heard that some girls pass back over this hill on nights like this to enjoy a little more life."

"I know a little about what you do, and I have a question for you in return. Why did you teach us how to speak? You told us humans invented language to pass ideas between each other, but you never ask us our ideas. You speak and speak but it seems all you want to do is bend us to our will. I don't want to bargain with you tonight, I want to see my son."

I was taken aback for a moment.

"Teaching you language is useful, and I wanted you all to appreciate your lives and understand your...situation. I can't take you to your son, but you are so young. There will be more children, and your daughters can stay with us. Are you sure you want to leave so early and never meet them? You're had a rough time, but it will get better."

For the first time since we entered the dark house, she broke eye contact with me.

"My daughters can stay, so they can face the same fate as this? Play this same little game with you? No, you won't get any more children or milk from me, old man."

"This decision you're about to make is irreversible. You will never see the sun again or your sisters–"

She reared suddenly, throwing up her front hooves like a deer.

"Your words sicken me! That's enough! Take me to my calf. Take me to my son!"

She crashed down upon me. My blade was clumsy that time. I know she tasted blood. This was never what I wanted for her or any other of my girls. Preparation and cleanup lasted until dawn. I did

not lead any grateful young animal back over the hill that morning, and after a cup of coffee I had to begin the day's work. No other cow questioned Socks's absence.

The night after that long day I prayed again for my salvation, although I know not to what and I know not from what. I never know from what. What wicked deeds have I committed? How have I sinned against the world? The world, which is such a huge mouth which always longs to be fed? All I do is feed. I try to do right by those animals out in my meadow, and do my job, and feed.

Got Milk

Jason Garrett Vickery

an abridged history of illusions

Maxwell Faustus

i enter my own room as pepper's ghost
i sit on my own chest
hold up a blurred forefinger and thumb
and pluck out a prop molar

my mouth pooling with corn syrup and food dye
i sing styrofoam graves into the open palm of my bed
where i am not laying down anymore

a hemlock grows from the discarded tooth
a tree born with sap that reacts to fire too well
which is why lightning bugs spring up from waves of glimmering ash
and yes it's almost beautiful
and yes its bones pop so loud you'd think the entire forest
can dislocate its shoulder

see how houdini gathers his spine into a crown
see how occasionally i think i'm some non-fiction/ bipedal thing

i keep pulling handkerchiefs out
of my throat in some desperate attempt
at shutting up
at throwing up all my entrails
to read them like a sideshow tea leaves prophet

i've learned how to tell if a mirror is two way:
you have to press your finger to the glass

and look for the gap between what name you're called
and what name you will respond to

and you can tell if you're swallowing fire
by what reflection
waves back in your epiglottis

a boy's arms buckle as he lowers into a tank
chains himself in translations of a french magician
and emerges with a title from the father of conjuring
later they will call him great

Hands

Victor Phillips

Walk through an old building and see a hand on every brick laid down. See the hands, don't forget the hands. Yes, the building is beautiful. The hands. Look at the fine wallpapers. Look at the hands. They're squirming between the floorboards. That chandelier is dazzling. A woman nearby snaps a photo. The hands aren't in the photo, though. They never show up in photos, because photos are supposed to be pretty. The fingers around the stairs are bent the wrong way. A man laughs as he crushes one under his sneaker. Just enjoy it. Stop looking at the hands. Stop it. You're ruining it for everyone here. It ruins the fun when you look at the hands. Are the hands bad? Stop asking dumb questions and enjoy the pretty things. So many pretty things. Silk dresses and silk suits and silk sheets. The velvet curtains are so nice you can't touch them with your filthy hands. I don't touch them with my filthy hands. I would love to live in this place, wouldn't you? There's a hand that tugs your ankle. You should want to. Everyone wants to. Shut up about the hands. We are the teeming hands. We won't always be the hands though. One day we'll all be silver forks and private jets and fire somewhere else. One day we'll be somewhere else, anywhere else. The hands will never choke us, we'll fly far away. One day we'll all be gone. All of us? Yes, all of us. All of us. All of us. Laughing into your own hands.

Abandoned

Noah David Bell

The Lost Inheritance of Edward Saul

Frank Henry

The withered apple tree was shedding its sallow fruits and they fell at last like fragile clumps of snow, shattering in the sun-bleached grass. Frayed and dented, the apples lay baking in the hot sun while the ants trafficked through, leaving plenty for the swooping cardinals and the coyotes that always arrived later in near cold autumn dark. Edward Saul was watching from the porch through the cage of his stiff cracked fingers.

"All that land," he muttered.

His grandmother was folded into her lawn chair that was crafted from the last good parts of an old fence. She could hear Edward but she was not listening. She in fact had a way of losing her blue ridge eyes in the tin ceiling and it always got Edward to stop since he was a child. It worked this time but not for long. Another apple fell and he went on.

"Well, I hope I remember what it looks like after they pave over the whole thing for another one of those damned grocery stores."

It was a small quiet brick house on the far side of three flat acres neighboring the two-lane road that curled into town. It was hard to pull out of the driveway without first listening for the sound of old tires unconcerned with time or destination. She lived on the other side of a sharp hill that showed no more road to the east, but in seventy-five years no one ever became the victim of a careless driver barreling over the hill. Another apple fell and Edward picked up again.

"You killed me you know that? Doctor said I got leukemia and that I can either work and stave it off or sit down and let it kill

me. I was gonna work that land back to life and you give all of it up. Now all I got is a radio and an old chair."

His grandmother knew about the leukemia and never questioned its sudden appearance. Edward was known to manufacture ailments in the past and she always knew when they were lies. This time she was not sure but it didn't matter. Nothing could distract her from the butterfly that shared the jewels of its blazing lapis wings with its joyous recipient. She liked to watch the butterflies before they vanished for the winter. This one, she was sure, would be the last one of the season. Edward shook his head and joined his hands together for no reason at all.

"I tried to tell you wasn't nothing could be done about that tree and that the only thing that made any sense would be to pull it out. None of them apples have been good since I was a kid. And the grass can't stand all that sun without no rain. Don't you go looking around the neighbors yards neither. They're all using turf now or some other kinda freakish grass that stays green all year round without no one ever having to touch it."

She drew a breath from her tank and it whispered high and sharp across the patio. Edward still was not used to the sound.

"What can I even say to you, mama..."

The butterfly landed upside down on the hollow rail that joined with the near pillar. His grandmother watched, stiff and silent with hope, pointing with her eyes to Edward's red shoulder. The butterfly complied and crawled quietly toward his back. Edward opened his hands and stared into them as if to blame them for something. He spent many nights the same way after his divorce and when his son moved away.

"I'm dying," he said. "I'm gonna die."

He knew the loss of the land was his fault. He was asked to mow the lawn and spray it once a week and to see what could be done for the tree even if his initial solution was correct. He always latched onto his first idea and never considered anything else. Such

people should not be at the helm of any inheritance according to his grandmother. The tank whispered again. Edward wondered how many more times he would hear it. Numbers flashed in his mind until he squinted them away and fixed his hands to the arms of the chair. He was going to leave.

The butterfly, as if afraid of missing its chance, leaped from the pillar and landed on him, resting in all its glory, opening its wings to flash the sun's triumphant light onto his grandmother's smiling face. Edward stood and the butterfly returned to its flight, corkscrewing into the breeze and celebrating the grandmother's victory. Edward did not feel it. He was not aware that a butterfly was near.

"Well, I'm going," he said, "maybe I'll see you tomorrow."

He walked past her and stepped over the tube that ran from her tank. He elected to pass through the house instead of the yard to avoid the sound of the brittle grass cracking beneath his boots. The truck crunched through the driveway after he started it and coughed down the long narrow road back to his retired mobile home.

Edward's trailer was a sadly ironic and sometimes offensive sight to the passers-by who were still becoming acquainted with the slow-growing town. It was short and plastic, encased in an eye-catching cluster of curled over trees, mourning the loss of their families that were cleared away for large barn houses owned by people who knew little about horses or farming. Trash bags of small clothes and antique ovens and dressers were sprayed over the lawn, splintered and collapsed into the dirt and the struggling stray grass. The sudden yard sale began with a toaster that worked fine so long as the cord could hold a charge. Then the low drawer in an out-of-place filing cabinet refused to close without later extending itself to its former extended position. It didn't last much longer after it left a hazel bruise on the narrow half of Edward's shin. He assumed that "good men" would come to their rescue and apply their craft to

the failed arteries of his home. He was wrong. Such men were moving away, fearing the rapid rise in population and that their shops would lose their value. So the corpses piled onto the rusted graveyard, seeming to multiply and spread like heavy shrapnel.

The hole left by the flying branch of a slanted oak during the last storm would have remained if not for the help of his abject nephew, who drove forty-five minutes every day from Bethle to help him. Edward could not afford to help with gas but that was okay. His nephew liked helping others and always came into the means to enable his selfless work.

he come by on a monday probably because it was the day after church and he only drives on sundays to get there and back he parked that car a his just off the road there a truck is okay because people see em a mile off and they never get hit sedans just give folks something to miss without no warning he said he had no idea and hed move it but I told him no no itll be fine he never argued about it never argued with no one I told him nanna was further up the road anyway but he said he come to see me I said what for and he pointed at the branch hangin off the end of my trailer I told him that was for me to figure out and dont you go foolin with it or youll bring the whole damn house down with it he smiled and got the tools from his car and that really pisses me off when people do that bring their own tools along when theres a perfect set they dont know about happened I couldnt find em anyway I told him again stop foolin with it but by the time I got the words out the branch was layin in the ground the hole didnt seem so big now that it was gone so I told him thank you for messin with my home without my permission and I would take it from there and he kept on with that damn smile when he smiles he looks at you funny like and he gets into your heart and your lungs and grows like a fern fern ain't right bamboo then nobody ever wants bamboo growin in their yard so thats what its like and he thought it was love but it felt like cancer he didnt know about the cancer I couldnt tell him something like

that all he would do is try to pray it away and that would just piss me off he went to work on the house and I figured wasnt no point tellin him to stop because he didnt know the meaning of the word so I just let him go he came by every day for two or three hours and he never asked for me to do anything I spent most of the time watching him work through the living room if I can call it that then the banging and the grunting was over with and his car putted back up the road and he was gone this time house looked brand new boy worked fast but he was thorough thats a good man to have around nanna liked him for other reasons but she liked him for that too maybe Ill have him come by when I get that land off a nanna maybe I wont I wont need the help there were flowers in the yard when he was done dont know when or even why he did that with all that junk up there with it he planted all kinds a purples and yellows and there were some white ones but he didnt leave no instruction on how to take care of any of em so I figured I would just sit and let them die aint no use havin flowers around in a place like this coffee pot was gone I noticed that later boy liked to work with his hands maybe he saw something he knew he could fix maybe it hasnt made its last cup that makes me happier than the flowers Ill drink from that pot if I ever see it workin again that would make things alright that would get me right up outta this chair

Edward leaned back in his stiff chair looking at the radio as it scratched through two worn speakers the familiar whimpers of an old violin. By now it was all the same sound. The signal, although reluctant to bid farewell to its faithful family of listeners, could no longer hold on to the rotting branches of the value of craft and talent and story. The sponsor breaks were much shorter now and it was hard to discern the mattress sales from the political ads. The station quit finally when the before the night became dense and the fog was just beginning to puff against the windows. Edward bent the tin-foiled coat hanger that was taped behind the dial but nothing changed and the static went on whispering over the dark-flooded

room. He sat down and let it crawl up the walls and hang like bats from the ceiling.

"Speakers were no good anyway." He leaned back in his chair again and dozed to the thought of the price he could get for it from the old thrift shop. It had long been out of business and a coffee shop had taken its place. He had gotten good at not thinking about the coffee shop. Night spread over the sky as the sun buried itself below the horizon behind the horse-keeper's estate. Edward fell asleep "couple dollars maybe. He's always been good with speakers."

He woke as usual just before the dim red sun crept over the heavy hills to leak into the wild of his untamed living room. It was still dark and alive with clutter, but he knew where his steps needed to go in order to make it to his dew-blasted windows so he could look out and hope for the mountain of junk to shrink or change from the curiosity of some out-of-town carpenter or electrician. It was the same but the early feeling of hopelessness had not captured him this time. The flowers in the corner of the yard were burning with light, piercing through the dark and the fog with a prophesy of angels in an early morning sky. At once he knocked open the door and tested its neon flares and the color was even more baffling to him without the diffusion brought on by the plastic windows. He was absorbed in their grin and soon he was pulled into it and embraced by the translucence before falling to his knees in front of their shimmering petals. With all of his attempts at ignorance and neglect they were somehow large and magnificent and he was almost inclined to apologize and brush the small beetles from their strong upright stems. He stayed there bent over, tearful beneath the rising sun that revealed their slouches of hidden anguish. Edward knew little about flowers but he knew soil and he saw by the color that it was in need of some water. He stumbled into his trailer and made out the rusty lip of an old bucket wrapped under a nest of faded newspapers and removed it with one heave. It was dented harshly on one side but it was still mostly silver and didn't have any holes. The good water he kept

in what served as a freezer when it was new. Nothing else would be fit for the plants. Edward returned to the flowers, beginning with two cupped handfuls over the face of each one. They bent under the weight so Edward lightened the load, letting fall mere grains of crystal, watching as they graced the emerald stems with their soft rolling descent. He continued until the bucket was empty. When he was done he pressed his cold fingers to his hot forehead and smiled.

He took care of the flowers that way for the following month, grateful for the plants and thinking about his nephew all the time. They didn't see each other often. He didn't see much of his family at all. But now he had beautiful flowers that shone like second suns throughout the day and stood fierce like lanterns within the empty night. Edward mostly either cared for them, researched ways to improve their stature and color, and admired them from his sunken front porch.

"Purple. She likes purple," he said. He was not upset with his grandmother anymore.

Edward took the bucket from its new spot on the counter and fixed it between his knees while performing the removal of the brightest tallest violet in the patch. It went into the bucket with the good soil and Edward jumped into the house for his keys.

He arrived in a few minutes. She was not in the living room when he stared through the thin veils that hung over the open windows. Edward raised a trembling hand to the golden handle. It was unlocked as usual and he limped into the musky room with a bowed head, dragging his guilty feet over the dust-capped carpet. The bucket went to the window in the kitchen. It was her favorite spot. She saw everything he did from there. All the times he hid from his parents behind the tree and much later when he would chase his son the same way. The flower would get plenty of sun by the window. He continued to the back porch and he found her, resting against the chair next to the tank that was not whispering anymore.

Carolina Wren

Laura Dame

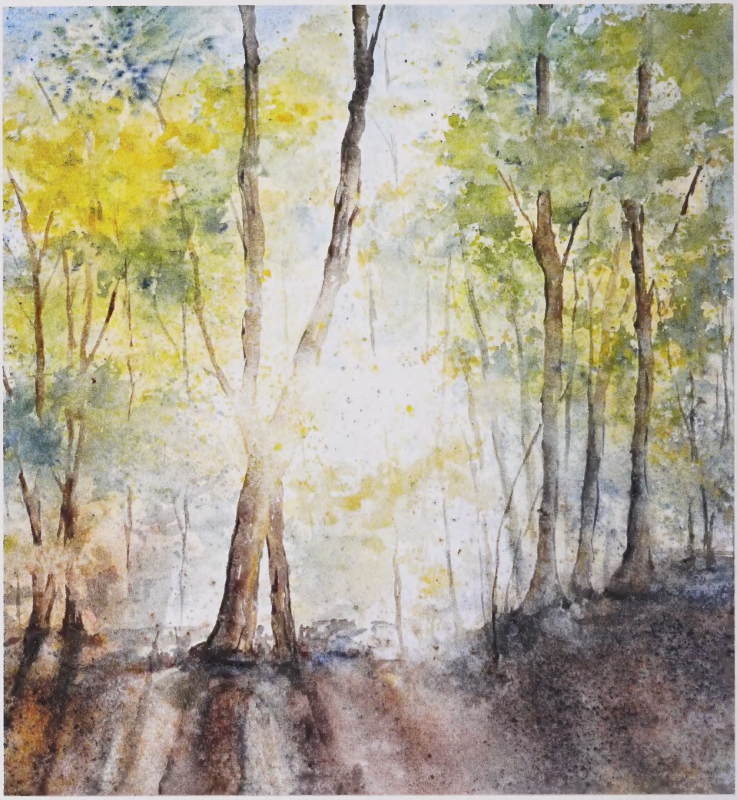
Teakettle-teakettle!
Sing, call—I'm listening
You trill beautiful trills
As you peek and peck
So gracefully goofy
Full up with your own body
All learned up of yourself
White stripe above your eye
A mark of your wise mind

That belly, too! Round tummy poking out with joy
Tail extending up! and beyond! like a funky plank—or a stick of cinnamon
Your awkward little body; precious
Teakettle-teakettle!
Darling baby warble that anthem!

Almond, hazelnut, toasted
Marshmallow feathers—you
Are a smile with wings, chipping
Away with that great big pecker
At the wreath of seeds. Good golly
Teakettle-teakettle!
Can you teach me how to dance like you?

Choose the Light

Bronwen McCormick



Bosses & Brothers

Kennon Webber

When Adam flew home from Djibouti in late summer and got his army discharge, he vowed: no more bosses! Weary of being told what to do 24/7/365, Adam quickly enrolled at the local university for fall semester. At 26 years, single, and G. I Bill benefits, Adam naively anticipated no more bosses.

In less than two years, in early February, Adam cycling to his part-time gig as a meat cutter, Adam laughed at himself. He had fallen in love, married an older woman with a seven-year-old daughter, and discovered his college mentor was a hard-ass business professor and retired CEO.

The worst boss was Hodge, who sat across from him, on that cold Saturday. Almost 55. tall, Hodge bossed the Meat Lab crew of students who sliced and diced dead cows to feed the dorm students. Adam, Tony and Hodge were playing Hearts just before 6 AM.

Hodge drew from the deck. His wrinkled, clean-shaven face turned red. Adam locked eyes with Tony, his work buddy. They both knew who had the Queen Bitch

Adam thought, "Good thing Hodge didn't play poker. He'd have lost his pants." Adam laid down three Jacks; Tony, three Eights. Hodge placed his cards, face down, and struggled into his bossy pants.

"Hey, it's after six," he croaked. We got plenty of carving to do this morning."

Adam knew Hodge and when it was show-up and shut-up time. Tony had not.

"This is bullshit! What's in your hand, Hodge?" Tony mouthed off. "You phony."

Hodge paused, looked down at Tony, and told him to move

a side of beef off the loading dock and inside the Meat Lab.

"You go with him, Adam," Hodge ordered.

To move a steamboat round, along the overhead track takes two cutters. Adam and Tony slipped on heavy, parkas over their white lab jackets and adjusted their white hard hats.

On the loading dock the wind blew off the plains and across this Midwestern campus, derisively called "The Farm." Tony was still fired up at Hodge. Tony was Italian, from Chicago, majoring in Business Administration. Only the Farm awarded Tony a four-year, full scholarship.

"I'll keep it tight. You push" Tony said keeping tension on the overhead pulley, so it didn't jump the icy rail, fall, and clock Adam on his hardhat. Adam pushed against the 200-pound cow carcass, hanging from its thick, heavy tendon of the left- rear hoof, and headed towards the freight door. Out of the wind and inside the shelter of the Meat Lab, Adam and Tony pushed the round to the cutting table. They thought no one was close, but here came Hodge again, still wearing his bossy pants. "Before you take off your parkas, Guys, bring another round inside."

"Hodge, this will take hours for us to carve out," Tony complained.

"Bring a second one inside. Then each of you will have something to do." He walked away, mumbling something about working faster.

"It's the speed-up, Tony," Adam explained. "Do more in the same amount of time."

"Screw that. I'm carving this round!" Tony, impatient as usual, stripped off his parka. Adam watched as Tony pulled out his boning knife and honed it razor-sharp at the sharpening stone stand at the end of the long worktable.

"Get out of that dumb parka, Adam. What's Hodge going to do? Fire us?"

Tony was right. It was difficult to get students to commit

to coming to work on Saturdays at 5 AM in the winter to bone out steamboat rounds for 8 to 10 hours at the university's Scrooge-level pay. Hodge trained a new "rookie" as he called his new workers, like they were on his sports team, almost every Saturday.

"Hey, Tony, back in the day, didn't your family own a butcher shop?" Adam asked, attempting to get Tony to chill. They had worked together for a few weeks and had party-ed a few times before Adam got married.

Tony stopped honing his knife. "How come all local yokels think all us Italians are in a mob? It shows how naive you are."

"C'mon, Tony. Don't get hot over it. Just wondering. I may be local but I'm not a yokel."

"As a matter of fact," Tony began, " my family owned a bakery. We made good bread and my whole family worked there. We were just making it when a Kroger store opened a block away."

"I know where this is going."

"Guess you do. But the Kroger store manager threw us a bone. He gave my older brother, just 16, a part-time job as a bagboy." Tony spit on the sawdust-covered floor. "Pathetic pay; worst hours."

"Well, it was something, I guess." Adam attempted to mollify his work partner.

"Not really. It took longer for us to lose the bakery and our home too, because we lived in the apartment above the store."

Adam was silent. Tony was finished at the sharpening station. Adam took his place. He oiled the dark Tennessee stone to a fine clear sheen; then he methodically drew his knife across the surface, point to heel, in an arc, then repeat, until his boning knife was as sharp as Tony's.

Tony continued, "The really funny--like weird part---is the Kroger manager was a tall, goofy guy that looked like Hodge," Tony went on. "And if we had been mobbed up, I would have done this!"

Tony fisted his knife in a stabbing posture and quickly

moved to the side of beef and ferociously plunged the razor-sharp blade into the side.

But Tony had not felt the side of beef first or he would have known the cow was solid ice. It was still frozen from being outside, on the loading dock, for the last two days.

His knife glanced off the frozen carcass of beef and directly through Tony's bright white lab coat and into his chest.

"What a dumb-shit thing to--" Tony never finished his sentence. He fell on the sawdust floor. Adam was stone, like the sharpening stone. It seemed like forever, standing over him, watching Tony's lab coat turn pink, then dark red.

* * *

The old man heard Adam come in about 9 AM that Saturday morning. He was surprised for Adam usually worked all day at the Meat Lab. He never clocked out before three, then pedaled home from the campus on his mountain bike. The weak winter morning sun filtered through the old man's bedroom window. He heard Adam drop the kickstand on his bike and start to rekindle the fire in the hearth.

"Daddee! You're home!" Seven-year-old Michelle clambered down the stairs and jumped into Adam's arms. The old man's daughter, Wendy, asked, "What happened?"

The big, wooden-framed, two-story was too big for the old man and his two dogs, but adequate for an extended family: a grandfather, a single mom and her 7-year old daughter, and now, the old man's son-in-law. Besides, none of them had much of a choice, given the economy.

The old man had his bedroom off the dining room. He used his portable toilet and exited the house by a separate entrance. From the back porch where his dogs were tethered, he could see Adam hunched over the kitchen table, with Michelle in his lap.

Wendy was at the stove, bringing the kettle to boil. The old man sat on the back porch, where it was protected from the wind

and rested his bum leg. At Kasserine Pass, shrapnel shredded his right leg. And he kept it.

"I was hoping you were still in bed," Adam said

"Too late, Sparky, you-know-who is up." Michelle kept annoying Adam, asking him to tell her a story. He just said later, later. Wendy told her to go watch TV and leave Adam alone. "Can't you see he's tired?"

Wendy poured boiling water through the filter for making coffee and joked, "You didn't get fired, did you?"

"No, I still have a job." Adam lowered his voice. The old man figured Adam knew he was listening. He got up, knocked his pipe on the concrete step to let them know he was there and entered the kitchen. The rich, freshly brewed coffee smelled delicious, and he was ready for a mug.

Adam and Wendy both acted surprised that the old man was up already and outside checking his dogs. He knew it was an act, but he let it pass. From the next room he heard the usual greeting, "Good Morning, Grandpa! How are Pete and Re-Pete?" He answered Michelle that both Plots were fine and missed her. He took his coffee mug and went back to the porch. "Home early, Adam, or are you going back to the job?"

"We clocked out early today, Sarge."

The old man had been a platoon sergeant in North Africa before a German .88 ended his army career. Being a veteran of a more recent and seemingly endless war and stationed in Africa, Adam always respected the old man's rank.

Sarge didn't ask why Adam left work early and he knew when to exit.

It was quiet and warm and clean in their kitchen. Adam sipped his coffee and looked down at his heavy, work boots and still saw flecks of blood. He had cleaned them three times after the campus paramedics wheeled Tony away.

Wendy, pert, blonde, and sharp, saw his hands tremble as

he lifted his heavy coffee mug. "Are you okay?"

"Sure," he lied. He looked out the backdoor window. The six-pack of bottled Coke sat on the ledge. He knew the temperature was dropping and he ought to bring it inside. But he could only hear Tony's voice, Whatadumbshitthingto-

"I don't believe you, Adam?" Her blue eyes studied his face. "What happened?"

Adam wrapped his coarse, rough hands about the ceramic mug. "We were just playing a game of Hearts before clocking in-"

"We? Who?"

"Just three of us.Boss Hodge, Tony and me. Remember Tony?"

"From Cleveland?

'No, Chicago."

"The guy who moved hot and heavy on that history undergrad?"

"Yeah-but that's not important now!" Adam's cup hit the table, spilling some coffee. "Hodge drew the Queen of Spades and threw in his cards. Said it was time to go to work. Tony laughed at him, made Hodge look like a fuckin' chump—"

"Shut that trash mouth," Wendy hissed. "Michelle parrots every word you say."

"Just hear me out. Okay?" Wendy was quiet but sullen.

"To prove what a boss man he is, Hodge gave Tony the crappy job of moving a side of beef from the loading dock into the Meat Lab. Remember how it takes two guys to move the ... '

"So, where's the beef?" Wendy interrupted, trying to lighten up the situation. But Adam was not amused and just said:

"Tony stabbed himself in the heart. He's dead."

Wendy didn't breathe. She just kept saying her mantra: "Hold tears. Hold tears."

Just a year ago she lost her best friend, her work buddy, at Coopers and Lybrand, to pancreatic cancer. Now her husband lost

his work buddy. It wasn't right. It shouldn't happen this way.

She looked to the back porch. Her father had gone to walk his dogs, as he always did on Saturday mornings, regardless of the weather. Michelle was still watching the Disney Channel. Adam was the only father she ever had. A couple of years after her divorce, Michelle's birth father died in an auto accident on New Year's Eve. A white out on black ice on the inter-state.

" ... they took Tony away and the rest of us had to sign some papers. Then Hodge told all of us to go home. And guess what?"

"What?"

"We got paid for the whole shift."

Wendy's wet, blue eyes flashed with anger. "You ... you think this is about money? About the Bottom Line because I work for a living as an accountant?" She shook his shoulders, clutching him. "Not this time! Not this-"

"Daddeee!" Michelle burst into 'the kitchen. "You promised. You promised to tell me a story!" She squirmed into his lap. "You got time. You're home early."

Adam held her, all warm, cuddly, soft, and so vulnerable. He looked to Wendy for help.

"Your daddy's tired. And cold. He's been up for hours; he needs some sleep. A nap, Michelle."

"Are you going to take one too?" The little girl pouted.

"Maybe." She smiled at Adam. "But right now, let's tuck Daddy in." Wendy coaxed her daughter to help her, saying, "Now, you can boss daddy."

Michelle led the way, and they went upstairs. Adam fell asleep as Michelle pulled the down coverlet over his wide shoulders and around his bristly chin.

* * *

Adam dropped into a deep, dreamless sleep and then rose to that semi-consciousness half dream, half awake. He was coming up for air after a swan dive off the high board. Only it was blood,

not water, he was swimming in; then slipping in. He pulled Tony's white-handled boning knife from his chest, and it slipped from Adam's sticky fingers. Adam was screaming but he had no voice because he was choking. Over and over, Adam pumped Tony's chest, but it felt as if he was pushing on a huge sticky, wet sponge.

In one last gasp, Adam forced Tony's mouth wide open and blew as hard as he could into Tony's mouth, in one final, feeble effort to bring Tony back, and it became the last kiss, a kiss of death.

Then Hodge jumped in, pushed Adam aside, screaming "My God! Call 911! My job, my God! MY JOB!"

Adam jerked wide awake, sweating and terribly thirsty. For a few minutes he did not know where he was. The huge house is so quiet. He heard Wendy reading a Dr. Seuss story to Michelle in the next bedroom. Adam padsed downstairs for a soda. The fridge

was empty of chilled beverages. He looked out to the back porch.

The temperature had dropped over fifty plus degrees that afternoon. All six bottles of Coke had burst. Above the shattered bottles the cola had frozen into an icy brown, distorted, funeral wreath.

Adam sat at the kitchen table, sipping a glass of water and attempted to pray.

Wendy silently stepped up behind him, covered his eyes with both hands and whispered, "Michele is asleep now."

Everlasting

Benjamin Ernest Zeidell

Fiddle Strings

Emily E. Carter

Thanks for having us folks. We're the Deep Holler Boys." His sandpaper voice shook Ava. She pushed through the crowd towards the stage then planted her feet on the front row, her mouth agape. Goddamn, Reed Wagner!

"We've just got back from a tour in Europe. It's fucking great to be home in Tennessee... 'scuse my French, this here's a family gathering!" He tipped his cowboy hat, his mischievous grin so intoxicating, pulled dried memories from Ava's mind. Many summers ago, dancing at the honky-tonk, his whiskers tickling her neck, her body caving into him.

Ava studied Reed and the three young men bent over their instruments in deep communion. They wore Wrangler jeans and plaid cowboy shirts. The familiar rush of the strings, the mellow thump of the bass, Ava's heart raced merrily as she remembered Reed teaching her to play fiddle, so different from her classical cello training.

Reed, Cam, Walt, and Jimmy were still together after six years. Reed put his fiddle to his side, his large hand curled around the delicate instrument, and wailed like his soul would burst from his chest, a deep guttural call that ripped through Ava's heart and mind.

Dupree's blows came in the form of words not fists, his cutting remarks about the way she cooked something, Liam's clutter around the house, worst of all the baby weight she still hadn't shed for three years now.

Ava inhaled the smell of sweat, sun, basking in the patchouli swirling around her. She scanned her surroundings, the hippies and cowboys pressed close to the stage, such a stark contrast to

Dupree and his manicured doctor friends. She stepped away from the stage and took in the Earth Day Celebration again. Festivals always made her feel a little more alive. Hell, being out at all these days felt like something special, especially since Liam's autism diagnosis. Festivals were completely out of the question and probably always would be. The loud noise and crowd would really agitate him.

Liam was a perfectly healthy baby boy, but when the delays began to mount — his lack of eye-contact, poor motor skills and speech delay — they finally took him to a specialist. Everything had changed so swiftly, the whole trajectory of their lives. Dupree blamed Ava for the loss of a son who would likely never play football, go to dances, make him proud. She remembered his cold glare in the doctor's office. Dupree could suck the joy out of the room, one misstep, any perceived slight. He turned it on for the crowd, but behind closed doors Ava would pay with a brutal verbal assault. Ava felt the familiar mixture of bitterness and fear squeeze her chest.

"Thanks for having us folks. We're the Deep Holler Boys and we'll be playing at Patrick Sullivan's in the Old City this evening." Reed's voice pulled her back to the present. Ava watched entranced as he removed his cowboy hat, tucked his fiddle to his side and took a bow. Ava's knees felt weak as she quickly walked to the rear of the stage before she lost her nerve. "Reed?" she shouted.

He looked up. They locked eyes. "Ava," he jumped off the stage and gave her a huge bear hug.

"I didn't know you lived in Knoxville." Reed's hazel eyes flickered in the late afternoon sun spray.

Ava looked down, her dishwater blonde hair falling over her emerald eyes.

"Yeah," I moved down here from Johnston City almost three years ago now." She buried her hands in her front jean pockets and felt a pang of guilt for not saying "we." "Your band changed its name. I like the new one better." Her words tumbled out.

"Yep, Cam and I had it out about 'Little Willow.' Cam said it was a sissy name."

Ava laughed, "So, The Deep Holler Boys!"

"It fits, don't it!" Reed's gaze pulled her in, and she was twenty-one again, a naïve dreamer ready to believe guys like him could really love her.

"Hey, you still playing the fiddle? You picked it up so fast." Reed's eyes lit up like maybe he'd remembered those private lessons too, the ones that ended his bed.

"Nah, I gave that up a while back. But I am giving cello lessons. It's about the best thing going for me." Ava looked into the distance thinking on her only escape from Dupree's crushing words and all of Liam's special needs.

"I bet you'd pick it back up in a hot minute!" Reed winked.

"You know you're probably right." Ava blushed and felt a new found confidence.

"You had talent Ava and living here in Knoxville there's such a great music scene. You outta get back into it."

"I just might." Ava exhaled deeply.

"Hey, we gotta do a short radio interview. I'm sorry we're in such a rush." He bent down and snapped his fiddle case closed stickers from all over, a cluttered collage of life on the road. "You've gotta come to our show tonight. We're playing in the Old City at Patrick Sullivan's."

"I don't know . . . it's hard to get away..." Ava thought of Liam, who would watch him since Dupree was out of town. "I'll try..." her words faded into the afternoon haze.

"Look, I'll put you on the guest list. You're coming!"

"I don't know," Ava bit her lower lip.

"Come on, Reed. We're gonna be late!" Cam hollered and waved from a circle of adoring lady fans.

Cam jogged over, black curls falling carelessly around his tight jaw. "Ava, well hell, good to see you girl." He turned to Reed

with a hurried smile, "Now, come on, we're gonna be late for our radio show. We'll see you tonight at the show, right?" Cam pulled Reed by the arm.

Reed grabbed Ava's hand. "Now you don't want to disappoint Cam do you?"

"Okay, what time?" A smile crept up Ava's cheeks.

"Ten o'clock," Reed squeezed her hand, a rush of electricity pulsing through her.

Ava's heart pounded; he could still do that to her, flip her totally upside-down, confused and totally helpless to his charms.

Overwhelmed, Ava closed her eyes, trying to forget the stark realities that gnawed at her mind. Ava felt the air swirl around her, and remembered dancing with Reed again, the way he dipped and twirled her. She opened her eyes to late afternoon tangerine light. Feel this. Be here now. She was going to that show tonight, someway, somehow.

***

Ava shuddered as she pulled into the driveway, a brick McMansion in a gated community. Ava's eyes filled with tears as it hit her, her home was her prison.

Ava entered the house by the garage door that led to the back den. Liam sat Indian style rocking side-to-side, watching Thomas the Train. Tow-headed and freckled, he looked just like her toddler photos.

"James red. James red," he repeated. Ava had to smile, a small victory since they started with the new therapist. She swooped down and kissed Liam on the cheek.

"Well, looks like someone decided to show up." Judith stood in the doorway, a laundry basket in her arms, poised and collected in an ivory pants suit. Her set silver hair gleamed, and her navy eyes sparkled. A mixed feeling of gratitude and disdain twisted in Ava's throat.

"You must have been enjoying yourself." Judith appraised

Ava with clenched.

"I really appreciate it Judith. It was great to have some 'me' time."

"Did you hear Liam's new words?" Judith pointed a bejeweled hand towards Liam.

"Yes, it's great to see the therapy really is making a difference," Ava swooned.

"Only when the therapy is followed up with routine and practice at home."

"Thanks for reminding me Judith," Ava's heart pounded in her ears.

"You know if your son was around for more than a minute to help out, and this weekend off at a car show!"

"Now, let's not make a scene Ava. Dupree is a doctor. That's what you signed up for." Judith's almond shaped eyes narrowed to small circles.

"He deserves a break. What about me? I'm here day-in and day-out. I go to all the therapies and still find time to teach my lessons."

Judith clicked her tongue against her teeth and shook her head. "You don't have to work. You choose to teach those lessons."

Unbelievable. "Well, the apple doesn't fall far from the tree," Ava whispered to herself.

"You've never worked a day in your life. You don't know anything about a career, a passion. I was supposed to be in the San Francisco orchestra..."

"Right, before you got knocked up and trapped my son in this marriage," Judith spat.

Ava wilted to the sofa, and buried her head in her hands, too tired to fight.

"Thomas blue. Thomas blue," Liam chanted.

"Let me keep Liam tonight. You seem tired. You can meet us at church in the morning," Judith stated in a patronizing tone.

"So, you can hold this over my head?"

"I'm offering you a break, Ava. Just what you said you needed." She did need it, and she wanted to see Reed again.

"Look, I've already packed his bag."

"Okay," Ava sighed, defeated. Of course, she'd counted on it.

Ava bent down and hugged Liam whispering. He just continued to rock side-to-side. This part of his disorder always stung Ava the most, his inability to respond to her emotionally.

"I've got it under control." Judith stood up from the coach adjusting her suit jacket.

"I'm sure you do," Ava muttered as she walked toward the front door.

***

The smell of sweat and beer hit Ava as she opened the large stained-glass door to Patrick Sullivan's Saloon. This historic tavern, and former brothel, exuded character. She could feel the stories under her feet, the crimes and histories breathing in the smoke tinged walls.

Ava smiled when the bouncer asked for her I.D. and felt a short heart palpitation as he scanned his clipboard for her name on the guest list.

"Yep, says Ava Roberts though?"

"Roberts is my maiden name."

"Alright, go on." the bald and bulky bouncer marked off her name.

Ava ordered a Pabst Blue Ribbon instead of her usual chardonnay at the bar, then fell into the sway of the crowd pushed up front in search of Reed. The fellows grinned wildly, their glassy eyes already lit up on Jack Daniel's. Walt with his big blonde beard thumped his upright bass and spun it around for show. Jimmy's shaggy chestnut hair covered his eyes as he plucked the banjo. Cam with his small, sinewy frame leaned into his guitar and kicked up

the heel of his black leather cowboy boot. Ava let the music roll over her — the guitar, banjo, bass and fiddle united in a melody of string and chords.

College girls danced in circles around Ava, fresh faced, hopeful. They wore heavy makeup and too tight jeans with barely-there tops. What would she tell her 20-year-old self? You'll never look this good again, don't fall in love with musicians, don't rebound with a med student, take your birth control.

With these college beauties spinning around her, Ava suddenly felt conscious of her own body and twenty pounds plus since college. Ava felt out of place, with her sleek bob cut and simple silver hoops. She wore a dusky rose tank top with a low scoop neck and deep indigo jeans that molded her curves just right.

Before Ava knew it she had ordered a shot of Four Roses and had another PBR in her hand. The bourbon pumped through her blood. She was filled up with the bluegrass music, a holy vessel of sacred song. Reed ripped up the fiddle, Walt thumped the bass, Jimmy plucked the banjo, and Cam bore into his guitar. They were all lost in the language of the instruments, privy to this strange tongue that spoke through strings.

Then a fiddle solo, Reed's strings flew into the air. He stomped and played, possessed. Popped horsehair dangled from his bow, remnants of a melodic furry. She danced, letting it move through her while he played the wild strings of her heart.

Ava danced up front now, between cool college boys and gaggles of drunk girls. She caught Reed's crackling hazel eyes, a fire-licked glow, and he grinned. Ava smiled back with every inch of her body that rose into the light. Then Reed was gone, again. Away, his eyes closed, taken over by the ghosts of musicians before him, lost to the instrument and the call. He moved his arm like a lumberjack sawing fast and swift into a log.

"One more song," Walt tilted his bass to take a bow. Ava couldn't believe they were almost done. Oh, shit, how many drinks

had she had?

Cam adjusted his guitar strap and grabbed the mic. "We'd like to ask this pretty little lady up front here, Miss Ava, an old friend of ours to come on stage and play with us!"

Ava blushed and surprisingly stepped on stage. Reed handed her his fiddle and stepped up to the mic.

"Wagon Wheel!" He winked.

Before Ava knew it she was lost in song, one with her instrument, a spirit much greater than herself whipping through her body. She played and sang, her soul bursting with delight. As the song came to an end, Ava stepped to the front of the stage playing beside Reed, their bodies leaning into one another. The crowd went wild shouting, "Hey, Mama Rock Me!"

At the end of the song, Ava handed Reed back his fiddle then hopped off stage. The bar flashed "Last call" lights. The boys did one final slow mountain ballad of lost love. Ava walked back to the bar, sat on a stool, and closed her eyes, her head spinning.

"Thanks for coming out, folks. We're the Deep Holler Boys. Buy some of our merch at the back table." Reed tipped his wide-brimmed cowboy hat, jumped off the stage, and headed straight for Ava. He came right up beside Ava, the bottle of Jack in his hand. "Want some?"

"I'm good," Ava smiled.

Reed took a couple swigs then sat the bottle on the bar. "Let's get some fresh air." Reed lifted her off the bar stool.

Ava yelped and followed him down a dark hallway into the alley behind the saloon. It felt like they had walked out of a sauna; the air struck her like a splash of cold water. They walked out of the lamplight by the back door where a van with wooden panels on the sides blocked the exit to the street.

"This your ride?" Ava patted the vintage van with peeling paint and a trailer hitched to the back. "I thought ya'll would've had a tour bus by now?"

"Hell no, we can't afford no bus," Reed chuckled. The moon slicked over his back, a werewolf of a man, his yellow hazel eyes twinkling in the dim alley light.

"What you been up to? How'd you end up here in Knoxville? I mean, the last time I saw you was in Johnston City. You were about to go on tour with that orchestra...right?" The questions poured from Reed's mouth.

Ava was surprised he remembered that much. They'd only dated for a couple months that summer, and even then she only got scraps of him. There was always competition.

"I was supposed to tour with them." Ava leaned back on the van; some paint flaked under her finger.

"But you know how it is, make plans and God laughs," Ava shook the would-have-beens from her mind.

"How did you end up here?" He looked down at her with curious eyes.

"I met a med student, Dupree." The words clotted Ava's mouth like clumps of dirt.

"You gone and got yourself a doctor, girl." Reed managed a smug grin.

After Reed, Dupree seemed so solid. He knew what he wanted. He had his shit together, and he had that same charm and magnetic pull in a different way. Ava had been drawn into his orbit; little did she know then that charm was only for the public eye.

Ava's scars were invisible. The shame and guilt haunted her. He could really put it on, that confident smile and charming charisma, but behind closed doors he was a monster.

"No, I got knocked up is what happened. We hadn't been dating that long. He's a local boy, from right up the road here in Strawberry Plains," Ava searched the night air around Reed. "Dupree, he's the type to do what you're supposed to. His residency was here, so we decided to move back to be close to his family especially when Liam came along." Ava looked up at him, reckoning her situation.

"I bet you're a great mom," Reed said genuinely.

Ava wished that were true, but she continually felt like a failure of a mother, especially in Judith and Dupree's eyes. Maybe if she tried harder, worked with him more, Liam could show her some affection.

They grew silent for a moment under the full moon, a pearly light falling down on them.

"I'll never forget the summer we met." Reed's eyes clouded up with memories.

"You guys changed my tire," she leaned back into the van.

"You were so mad. Couldn't stand being a dependent female?"

"Well, I could've done it myself...," Ava stepped away from the van and put her hands in her back jean pockets.

"So, whatever happened to your fiancée, Rena?" Ava's words caught her by surprise.

Reed turned to his side, looked into the night, and adjusted the buttons on his plaid shirt. "She left me, backed out right before we were gonna get hitched. Said, she didn't trust me. Would you believe that?"

Ava caught the twinkle in his eye, "Go figure," she laughed.

"I mean it was for the best, anyway. I'm on the road all the time. It's too hard to keep it going when things are like this..." Reed's voice sagged with the weight of regret.

"Funny how you forgot to mention her when we first met." Ava looked straight at him, her confidence rising. "You know you could have told me..." Ava closed her eyes and sighed, trying to swallow the harsh memories. She opened her eyes when she felt his wide, callous finger on her cheek bone, the deft touch of his finger swept up to the corner of her eye and back away.

"Now close your eyes again and make a wish." He smiled with a tenderness that unsettled her.

"What?" She sighed.

"Just keep your eyes closed and make a wish."

"Okay." She wished for the morning not to come. She wished to be twenty-one again. She wished she could sweep out all the pain. Reed traced his rough finger under and away from her eye again, sending shivers down her spine. Ava opened her eyes, and he stood there smiling, that crooked grin that always undid her.

"What was that all about?" She poked him playfully in his rib.

"You had an eyelash, one under your eye. You had to make a wish before I wiped it away."

"I've never heard that." She rocked back on her heels.

"Now don't tell me your wish." He put his finger on her lips and leaned into her gaze. She could feel his breath on her cheek with a sweep of desire that blew down to her toes. The heat quivered in her thighs. She held his stare for a moment and remembered the first time; how he'd slid her sundress off one inch at a time.

Ava blinked and stepped back shaking her head. "How did you even see an eyelash?" Ava playfully punched him in the shoulder.

"Full moon," he said solemnly drinking her in, "...and I was looking real close."

"I know."

"It's just been so good to see you Ava." Reed looked away a moment.

Ava grabbed his hand in hers, and he pulled her in. She buried her head in his tangled hair, his cedar musk settling over her.

"You too," she muttered into his chest. She started to pull back, but his lips fell on her neck, their warm flesh unpeeling the desire from her own skin. Ava felt like she would dissolve into the night air around her. She wilted into his kiss, her limbs loose with endorphins; their heat held them up. Reed reached behind her and unlocked the van door.

A lusty film glazed over his eyes. She should give in, let go,

fall into the abyss of his soulful eyes. Ava deserved this, it wasn't like Dupree was faithful. She had suspicions of his indiscretions. Lori in his office, the doe-eyed blonde with long nails. The way Lori's eyes lit up when Ava saw them interact. That night he came home at dawn after the work party.

Ava dug her hand in her front pocket and bit her lip, as Reed fumbled to move stuff from the long middle seat. She sobered for a moment, watching him push junk around, thinking of the other women she found out about in addition to his fiancée.

Reed turned toward Ava and pulled her in toward him.

Ava pushed Reed back "I can't. I'm married. I'm a mom." she stepped out from him and looked away down the alley at the milky moonlight.

"Oh, little Levi won't mind if mommy has some fun." Reed patted the seat under him.

"His name is Liam," Ava said through clenched teeth, and she stepped back further.

Reed lurched out of the van, his cheeks flushed with embarrassment.

"Come on Ava, we used to have so much fun?" He grabbed her breast.

"Cut it out!" She slapped him in the face, the sharp clap of skin surprising her.

"Ouch! What'd you do that for? I thought you wanted this." Reed's eyes flashed with anger.

"I just remembered...remembered why it never worked out." Ava thought about how Dupree and Reed weren't so different, charming self-centered, womanizers.

"Look, I'm sorry Ava. I got carried away." Reed coughed.

"You sure did!" Ava turned just as Cam and Jimmy rolled out the back bar door flanked by two women, a blond and brunette laced between them. One carried pink heels in her hand and stumbled barefoot; the other girl wore a halter top with no bra. She whis-

pered in Cam's ear. He grinned, "We're headed down to the Tennessee river. The girls here know a special spot. You grab Walt; he's still at the bar with a girl. She knows the way. Then you all can bring the van down."

"There's a cooler of beer in the back," Cam called over his shoulder as the group exited the alley in a zigzag line laughing.

"The call of duty." Reed reached out and took Ava's hand. "Sure you don't wanna come down and take a dip with us for old time's sake?"

"Nope." Ava shook off his hand.

"Fancy seeing you here tonight m'lady," Reed bowed and curtsied.

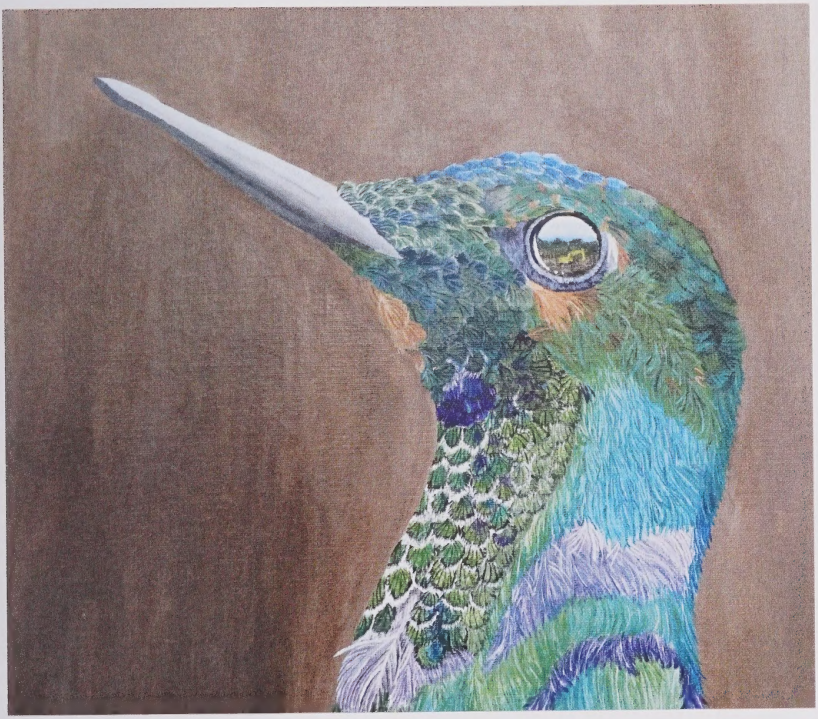
"Some people never change!" She turned and walked away.

"Ava," Reed's voice cracked for the slightest second.

Ava hurried down the alley then onto the street, determination beating through her. She would go home and pack up her and Liam's things, leave Dupree for good this time. Ava marched up the cobblestone, hope swelling like a hum inside her.

Witness

Hannah Gregory



American Phantom

Victoria R. Cavanaugh

The sound of popcorn kernels thrown into a flame
Plentiful – then it ebbs.
The smell of ash
Pop–pop–pop
Wax and parchment
Pop–pop–pop
Balloons after a baby shower
Pop–pop–pop
Happy things, good things
You stiffen.
Happy things, good things
They laugh
Your heart aches
Relish in the mischief of the forbidden
A flash of a memory, of films and newspaper clippings
Men and boys branding their country's flag
Patriotism, they say
God bless America, they say
Pop–pop–pop
Happy things, good things – No such thing
Ms. America, Lady Frankenstein
Stitch by stitch, we brandish our flag
God save America
Cruel or weak, it does not matter,
No one is coming to save her

Winter Twilight

Kari Richmond

Triptych

James Z. Mimken

I.
Cannabis smoke, ruby eyes watering.
There she sets out my future on the floor.
Through stained-glass windowpanes, birdsong snakes in.
Lovers, Tower, and Chariot, she found her

Self ignorant of fortune telling.
Limbless, I crawl through her bedroom door. She
Disarms, controls me. She is suffering.
Lovers, Tower, and Chariot, let her be

Forgotten by the masses that meet her to
Smoke, yet her scent still lingers in my dream.
Saccharine stench of ash and perfume.
Death, Justice, and the Hanged Man, I am

Lost, smoke in lungs, too bitter to hold in.
Breathe me out and let me dissolve in wind.

II.
Shining brilliantly in the Spring sun.
Emerald blades are growing over me.
I am The World.
Desiccation of my limbs from heat and
Breathed-out wind that swims indifferently.
I am The World.

III.
Topographic details of diamond crawl over
The ring in my hand.
Pawn-shop jewelry is perhaps the sweetest.
I borrow this gem as others have,
As the world will borrow my body when I no longer
Have need for it.
She holds tightly my branches, carving *emét* into my husked-out forehead.
Golem, human, Death, Justice, Hanged Man, World.
All cohabitate in my veins.
All insufficient to describe a single cell of myself.

The Moment That Changed Everything

Michelle L. Appollo

The moment has come as I clench the plastic wrapped suit looking for a room to slip into. The room was eerily peaceful and quiet as if time had stopped for a moment. In the background, I can hear the beds rumbling down the hall like a herd of elephants barreling through the jungle. Quickly pulling the suit up over my body, my hands tremble as I adjust the zipper. By now my face is flushed from exertion; I put my face mask and shield on and pull the hood down to secure the seal. Standing in silence, I close my eyes and inhale; slowly grasping the door I whisper, "Please, God." A rush of summer heat hits me as I enter the hall. My face shield fogs as I suck in air. My body feels like a weighted balloon as I run to the front of the hall. There in silence we all stand, as they barricade the entrance of the hall with plastic, sealing us and our fate as well.

At the beginning of the pandemic, I had been working at a retirement facility for three years. Much like the rest of the world, COVID consumed my life. The morning news, the car radio, and the CDC restrictive rules at work – all overwhelming. My coworkers and I did everything we were asked to protect the residents.

On August 10th of 2020, our facility finally succumbed to the virus, and the tragedy that followed will forever be burned in my heart and soul. I arrived at work early as usual that day. The facility was in an uproar. Rumors of who brought it in began to circulate, and management was vigorously pulling out supplies and setting up the COVID unit while we moved residents. Amid the panic, I was trying to do my job and grasp what had just occurred. Wrapped up in the moment, my duty, my responsibility, I turned to my boss and

said, "I will work in the COVID unit if you need me to." She agreed and handed me a hazmat suit. Little did I know that what I was about to experience would be so horrific that it would change the course of my life.

"How many?" I asked the nurse, gazing down the hall in bewilderment. "Seven," she said, her voice calm and subtle. Her face softened. She could see I was terrified. I could feel the turmoil of anxiety building up inside. I quickly asked if there was an exit. "Not yet," she said, "They are still working on it." At that moment I could no longer hold in my emotion, and I bolted toward an empty room and shut the door. I paced the floor vigilantly with tears in my eye and tearing at what now felt like a death shroud that I was wearing. "Why did I agree to this?" I peered up to the ceiling praying in hopes that God would hear my pleas for safety and relief. Later, walking down the hall, recomposing myself, not wanting the residents to see my fear, I knew that I needed to be strong for them.

One room at a time, I visited offering comfort and encouragement. Some were annoyed at the situation and felt inconvenienced. Others panicked in confusion and worried about their belongings. I reached the bottom of the hall and in the last room, there she was. This bleak little woman gazing at me with her weak reddened eyes. I spoke to her softly holding on to her thin, frail hand, but she was unable to speak. Trying to ease her, I gently repositioned her. I could hear her body crack and crumble as she bellowed in pain. This would be the last time I would see her face.

As weeks went by, the numbers grew. I would see more devastating cases. Some survived; many did not. I saw more tragic deaths than in my entire career.

And now I must live with this experience every day of my life.

God Conceal Carries in Texas

Jack B. Clements

Danielle sees Buc'ee the beaver's fluorescent grimace through the backdoor's tinted windows. Well, for a moment at least. Then, her captor's ski-masked figure rocks back into her view. He has not stopped rocking back-and-forth since Shreveport. Along with the rocking chair motion, he is playing Clash of Clans with the volume on full blast, while saying nothing. In fact, she hasn't either; she can not. Since her mouth is duct taped, her legs zip tied to the legs of the chair (she was thrown in after they grabbed her), and her arms zip tied to the arms of the chair. Hence, the only noises echoing in the back of this grimy, vile van is Clash of Clans' sound bites and notifications and her captor's pudgy white fingers continually thumping his phone's screen.

Danielle knows for certain they are at the Buc'ee's in Terrell right off I-20. She has been awake since the traffickers stole her, so the timing and speed adds up perfectly to her. Plus, her family always stopped at this Buc'ee's on their annual June vacation to Six Flags Over Texas. She knows where she is. Not like that is helping her, however. When they stole her, the snatchers chucked her tote bag, phone, and keys out in the desolate Wendy's side of the parking lot.

• • •

"Danielle, honey, come on now, get in the picture with your brother, now. He was just picking. We don't have all day, especially if y'all want to ride the Mr. Freeze," says Mrs. Halley with the Texas sun blasting down on her in the concrete jungle that is Six Flags Over Dallas.

"No, not until he says he is sorry. He purposely called me a 'buck-toothed whale' when the baseball team walked by," an 11-year-

old Danielle shouts back to her mother and her sidelined father.

"Oh my gosh, Danielle. No, I did not. Mom! She is lying! Obviously! Danielle, stop acting like a titty baby! We are not going to be able to ride the Mr. Freeze if you keep this up," shouts 14-year-old Tommy Halley across the Alamo stage set to his younger sister.

Danielle hunkers her shoulders and begins walking over with her head thrown down. "Ok, but just because I want to ride Mr. Freeze, not because of this butthead's stupid excuse."

"See, I told y'all would you work it out," Mr. Halley says enthusiastically from the shaded bench.

Danielle and Tommy stand by each other in front of the painted Remember the Alamo wall, not touching, Danielle still with her sunken head. "Ok, now y'all scoot a little closer," says Mrs. Halley, waving her free hand over her head, with a camera to her eye. Both adolescents sigh audibly and scoot shoulder to shoulder. "Ok, now, y'all smile at least," says Mrs. Halley. Both of the Halley kids give their best fake smiles. Right when the flash goes off, Tommy says quietly through his smile, "Fat beaver girl."

Danielle begins screaming, turns towards her older brother, who is now shrugging his shoulders acting oblivious, and sends her dominant foot into Tommy's crotch. She shouts, "Fuck you, shithead!" as Tommy falls to the Texas pavement.

"Danielle Marie Halley!" says Mrs. Halley running towards her children. Her father comes jogging off the bench.

. . .

She hears the passing truck-stop commotion and the frequent convenience store welcome chimes outside her portable cage. Danielle notices the Buc'ee's chimes were the exact same ones that Wendys' has. Her other captor, the driver, must be a part of this convenience store commotion either pumping gas, getting snacks, and/or taking a bathroom break. The gamer nor the driver care if Danielle needs or wants anything.

With Danielle disassociating, blood begins to seep out her

nose. The trail of blood slowly paves its way over the duct tape, drips off her chin, and puddles up onto the logo of her Pilot Wendy's worker polo. She is away, thinking of her AP US History paper on Divinity and Manifest Destiny she submitted earlier today in third period. That thought quickly reminds her of Bryce and how he had said cute things about her outfit during lunch today. The sound effect of a Clash of Clans raid being abandoned resonates off the van's plywood interior beckoning her back to the present moment. Why did he stop playing now? Then, she notices a faltering discord occurring outside the van.

"Sir. Please keep your distance." a soft-spoken, Texan voice says. "My wife was just trying to say she would appreciate an apology for you whispering such foul language to us while we were just simply in line."

A rugged, droning voice responds, "Fuck off. I am just calling it like I see it. Now get lost you two hick dykes. Or you will be fucking sorry."

Frantic footsteps begin shuffling outside. Her captor quickly jolts up to the blacked windows. He peeps out the window for a moment then jolts down, back against the doors. His bloodshot eyes look at Danielle for a glance, then he pulls a gun out of his coat. He points the gun at her. It is the same gun her father keeps locked in a metal box under her parents' bed: a Glock G19.

Remaining silent, her captor puts a finger to his ulcerated lips protruding out of the dusty, black ski-mask. Danielle begins shifting eye contact between the gun's suppressor and her abductor's blooded stare.

. . .

"Ms. Halley, you are going to need to be disciplined for your behavior today at lunch. Outbursts like you had are simply not acceptable here at Lee Elementary, especially from someone who will be in middle school next year," Mrs. Banks easily says to a seated, sobbing Danille with her knees to her chest, mumbling "sorry" over

and over.

"Ms. Halley, it is too late for apologies. You did what you did and, and as we teach y'all here at Lee Elementary, actions have consequences," says Mrs. Banks.

As she reaches under her desk, she pulls out a wooden paddle with drilled holes throughout. Danielle's sniffles stop and eyes widen.

"Now, Ms. Halley, your parents signed the circumstantial-disciplinary sheet we send home every year. So, it is in our hands to discipline you. The required discipline, as on the sheet, is three paddles." Danielle's sobs and apologies return, louder and more incoherent than before.

"Mrs. Banks, I didn't mean to. It's just Mrs. Cormick is always unfair and mean to me. She got onto me in front of me for pickin' my nose," Danielle gets out through her sobbing and then frantically continues. "Then, then, then, she made me eat alone with germex right by me. That is really mean, Mrs. Banks. And I jus-"

"Now, Ms. Halley, if you continue to insult one of our finest teachers, then I will have to add to your discipline. On top of that, if you can not control yourself right now and take your discipline, we will have to call in Officer Hooks to restrain you while you receive your discipline." Danielle suddenly runs to the corner of the office, hunkers down, and continues her profuse sobbing.

"Officer Hooks, please report to the principal's office. Officer Hooks, please report to the principal's office," says Mrs. Banks into the intercom on her desk.

Moments later, the door swings open and Officer Hooks' potbelly, mustached self wobbles into Mrs. Banks' office. "Officer, please restrain Ms. Halley for her required discipline."

Danielle goes limp as Officer Hooks picks her up with one arm and carries her to Mrs. Banks' desk. His massive hands hold Danielle's 10-year-old hands against the surface of the desk. Danielle lays her head on the desk, motionless and quiet.

"Ok, Ms. Halley, you are going to receive three paddles for your outburst towards Mrs. Cormick at lunch today," says Mrs. Banks.

Danielle receives three paddles to her rear, each stings exponentially worse and each jolts right through her sweatpants. Officer Hooks raises her off the desk and lets go of her. Not saying one word, he nods to Mrs. Banks and wobbles back out the office. The door shuts behind him. Danielle stares down at her tears puddled up on the desk as the sting begins to inflame.

"Now, Ms. Halley, I hope you have learned your lesson. Now, please clean up your mess and return to class."

. . .

A sudden gunshot interrupts their staring contest. A defiant, harshly feminine voice from outside goes off, "Call us 'dykes', now, you hateful sumbitch."

"Oh, Marge. Honey! Why! Why would you do that! He just had a knife," Marlene says, now with heavy strokes of panic, "He wasn't gonna do nothing serious. He was just bluffing, Marge. This is serious."

"Babe. He charged us. Aint nothing we could've done. Simple self-defense. We were within our rights," Marge says.

The rest of the exterior conversation muffles out as her captor springs up to the window, once again, back completely turned to her.

Danielle does not hesitate. She rises to a hunchback form still tethered to the chair. She bends her knees and shoots off. Her first bunny hop gets a good distance but not quite to her abductor. The violent shake caused by her landing turns him towards her. His bloodshot eyes leer through the eyeholes like two lunar eclipses in effect, and he cuts the gun at Danielle. She bends and flies towards him like a leaping frog. A gunshot echoes throughout the walls of the van. The bullet barely misses Danielle and instead pierces out the roof of the van. The score of outside's hysteria pauses. Danielle

lands head first into her captor's chest, hurling them both against the doors. Danielle finds her head lain against the doors. With no second guess, she starts thrusting her head back-and-forth against the doors. Her captor comes out of a daze and recognizes what is happening. He starts punching, scratching, biting Danielle in an attempt to get the tethered chair-girl from violently throwing her head into a van door. His puny, desperate attempts prove futile.

The doors swing open, throwing Danielle and her abductor onto the damp Texas asphalt. Danielle lands face first busting her nose even more and shattering the chair's frame on impact. Her malefactor falls a few feet behind her. Two brawny, graying women rush to Danielle. The baffled crowd around the scene gasp at the reality of what just tumbled in front of them: a ski-mask individual and a restrained adolescent girl spewed out of the back of a dusty black van.

"Sug. Sug. Are you alright?" says the taller, gray-haired woman, her dialect matching the soft-spokenness from moments earlier, to Danielle, who is now fetal-ed on the ground with just the legs and arms of the chair still zip tied to her limbs.

Another, slightly-younger-appearing, mulleted woman whips out the buck knife strapped to her side, and a concealed revolver on the other side, and cuts the zip ties from Danielle's limbs. Danielle rips off the duct tape and rolls over onto her back. She starts sobbing silently with her crooked nose, still oozing with blood, pointing up to the full moon over Texas.

. . .

"Hey Danny, how are you, sweetie?" asks Billie Ann Halley from her hospital bed.

Danielle, walking into the fluorescent-lit, teal-colored hospital room, shutting the door behind her, answers, "I'm doing alright, Mamaw."

"That's good, sweetie. Could be doing bad and that wouldn't be good!" Mamaw begins chuckling, moving her tubes and IVs with her.

Danielle smiles and sits down in the chair next to the bed.

"Yes, ma'am, that wouldn't be good."

Danielle finds Mamaw's hand and wraps it around hers. She can feel the IV in between their embrace.

"I love you, Danny. I know you know that."

"Yes, Mamaw. I know you do. I love you, too, Mamaw." Danielle squeezes Mamaw's hand and wipes the tears away with her free hand. After wiping away the tears, Danielle locks eye contact with her Mamaw's big gray eyes.

"And I want to tell you another thing, I know you already know and have heard me say a million times, but we both know we ain't got much ti—." Mamaw pauses and gestures to the glass on the tableside. Danielle grabs the glass and brings the glass and straw to Mamaw's mouth. Mamaw takes a couple sips. She clears her throat and continues. "Like I was saying, we don't have much time. So that being said. I want to tell you that you need to be willing, okay. Times are getting better, our family loves you and cares for you tremendously, and you live a good, safe life, but you still gotta remain willing, through all the good and all the bad. Be willing to fight for yourself. Sometimes all you got is yourself, when god can only do so much. That's when you got to meet him in the middle, being willing to do anything to reach out. You understand, Danny?"

"Yes ma'am. I understand," answers Danielle, watery-eyed and red-cheeked.

"Good. I knew you would, strong girl. I love you." Mamaw grins and says with pride, "Now, let's see what Nancy Grace has to stay tonight!"

. . .

Danielle remains on her back sobbing for some time until she notices a figure out of her peripheral. She sits up and sees blood

slowly leaking from under the still body face-first on the ground with a Glock G19 at its limp hands. She turns to the left and sees the crowd inching closer to the hooded, below average Clash of Clans player propped up against the back of the van. She quickly realizes that both the limp body on the ground and the hooded enigma were wearing the exact same clothes. She quickly realizes they also both have—or had—Glock G19s. She quickly realizes these two are the wicked individuals that stole her in that truck-stop-fast-food-hellscape parking lot only two and half hours ago. Danielle's sobbing comes to a seemingly abrupt halt.

Danielle stands up and immediately falls down to her knees. Danielle lets out a grunt and attempts to get back to her feet but falls once again.

In a raspy voice, Marge calmly says, "Hey, sugar. Be careful, now. You seem a little banged up." She then bends down to Danielle and hands her a folded up bandanna, "Here, sugar, take this." Daniellle takes the red, white, and blue bandanna and holds it firmly under her nose. "Marlene will help you to our truck while these people and I settle this out for when the police and the ambulances get here."

"Yeah, girl, I will get you taken care of." Marlene puts an arm around Danielle and helps her to her feet. With one arm around Marlene's shoulders and the other holding a Marlboro 4th of July bandanna up on her nose, Danielle makes eye contact with those congested blood vessels one more time. He is now completely surrounded by folks as Marge is taking the Glock G19 from him. Right when his pasty white hands go to pull the ski mask off, Marlene shifts herself and Danielle around the opposite direction and starts walking away from the citizen's arrest.

Marlene eventually directs them to a metallic red semi, hauling nothing, parked at the diesel pumps. They reach the truck and stop at the door. Marlene props the door open and eases Danielle up the step up, onto the leather passenger seat. A shaggy brown

and white Jack Russell greets them.

"Oh don't mind him. His name is Squirrel. He don't hurt nothing." Marlene chuckles, rubs the dog's head, and continues, "And he couldn't if he wanted to. He 'bout as useless as a broke-dick dog, but hell, we still love him just the same."

Danielle grins and, with her free hand, pets Squirrel. She mutters out, "Yes ma'am."

"Now, you just sit here with Squirrel, girl. We will figure this all out and get you home. We will keep them doors locked and have folks stand out front until the police get here."

Marlene looks into Danielle's eyes, gives a bittersweet smirk and says, "I'm sorry this happened to you, sugar. No one deserves this. I know it is far from over. But we gonna get you safely home. I promise."

Danielle nods softly, looks down to Squirrel at her side, and starts rubbing his back.

"Alright, sweet girl. You and Squirrel behave y'all's selves now. I will be back in a few." Marlene grins, hops off the step up, and firmly shuts the semi's door. A thudded lock noise quickly follows.

. . .

Two minutes later, Danielle is wide awake with her head against the chilled window with her finger pressed into the divet of the door's lock button. The bloodied, patriotic bandanna is in her hand that lays across her stomach. The blood is not flowing but caking under her crooked nose. Squirrel is fast asleep, up against his new-found friend. Marlene and Marge's CB radio going in and out of frequency and the restful breathing of Squirrel soothes Danielle's fresh edge into a place of manageable uncomfortability.

The Ghost at Craggy Pinnacle

Harrison J. Street

The Salamander

James Z. Mimken

July 7th, 2008. Paul sat upon his upholstery throne of a driver's seat as he eased his metal slug of a 1996 Honda Civic into the driveway of his apartment. The dim lines of his digital watch let him know it was 5:50 pm. He walked across the asphalt. As he impaled the key into the front door of his home, he sighed out a ghost of wind that tickled the hairs of his implication of a beard. There he stood in the threshold between the sunset, shooting bullet holes of xanthic rays through the glass of his front door, and the enveloping darkness of his mid-century apartment.

The sky is burning, he thought, as the heat from the sunlight danced on the back of his neck and caused the edges of his skin to glow red. He molted his coat and bag to the ground and walked into his kitchen. He flicked the wall switch on, filling the room with cold light. His 300 square-foot apartment was not so much a home as it was a storage container for his belongings.

Meredith is gone, he thought as he pulled a glass container of rice from his freezer. Meredith was his coworker. She was Paul's elder by a few decades. She worked in the human resources department. She died of a heart attack. She shared a name with Paul's mother. She gave everything she had to her work, and it killed her.

Paul sat on his couch, its yellowed floral-patterns reminiscent of what an archetypical working-class grandmother might own. The cigarette smoke baked into the fabric further cemented this idea. An illusory cheetah chased a gazelle across his face as his glazed-over eyes absorbed a rerun of a nature documentary on the TV. Due to the writer's strike earlier in the year, few new series were airing on TV this season. His television set was old enough to vote, so its static ensured it was never silent despite the broken speak-

ers. The volatile crackle of the machine forcibly bending the light into facsimiles of life harmonized with the wasp-nest of a barely functional air-conditioning machine. Paul had once wished to be a musician if his life had turned out differently, so he recognized the harmonization of the mechanical hums as a diminished fifth. The Devil's interval. Satan occupied this abode, and no one yet knew it.

July 8th, 2008. Paul arrived at his work at 9:02 am. As he parked his car into a grey asphalt box, he looked at the rectangular ogre that towered over him. "California Equity Trust Partners, LLC," read the black and white block letters of the brutalist structure. The company was not from California, so the title confused Paul.

As he pulled up his rolling chair to the desk in his cubicle, he thought, *I am the drone, and this is my little comb of the hive.* His job was to provide out-of-court settlements for families of victims of asbestos.

"Two after? Paul, you're killing me," spoke Paul's manager, Richard. "At least let us know next time."

No. "Yeah. Sorry."

Richard was a stout sort. His skin was splotchy, and his smooth, reddish head seemed to reflect the physical texture of his brain.

"Anyways, Miriam's already gotten started," Richard said, "so have her catch you up on your new client."

Miriam? "Okay. Yeah."

Paul didn't know a Miriam in his division. He exited his cubicle in a mood both moth-to-flame and lamb-to-slaughter. A woman stood before Paul. She looked exactly like Meredith, short and round, wrapped in a soft lavender sweater. She was a twee illustration of a church mouse. Her dirty-blonde hair was the only thing separating this woman from Paul's late coworker.

"Hi peach! I'm Miriam. I'll be your office buddy."

This company is a salamander, Paul thought, *you cut off the tail, an identical one regrows.* Paul's recent consumption of nature

documentaries put the image in his mind. He was unsure of why, but it reminded him of an incident from his youth.

October 5th, 1987. Paul had stolen a pack of cigarettes from a gas station. When his mother found out, she did not scream, she did not beat him, she did not look angry. Her face was unmolded clay as she asked, "Why?" She hanged herself a week later.

2008. 5:50 pm. Paul returned home and worked his way to the alley behind the apartment complex. The brick walls were lined with the generations of grime like a passing river depositing its sediment. In his hands he carried a baseball bat from his childhood. It was worn with the grooves and dents of a dozen little league whiffs. He had dragged with him an old rolling chair, its fabric molded away and sewn back together with forgotten t-shirts from summer camps and college open houses. He raised the bat into the air and brought it down with the force of putting down a wounded animal. And he did it again. And again. He did not feel better. The chair broke. He went back into his apartment and retrieved a no-longer used desk from work. Gum was stuck to the bottom like a layer of pinkish-blue cement. When he beat this unwanted item of furniture however, an experience truly bizarre occurred. As the bat forced its wooden flesh into that of the desk, the desk began to bleed. Only a little at first. Smears of red that could be mistaken for weathering. Then tiny spirts began releasing with each blow. By the time the desk had been bent into a horrible right angle, it was gushing blood. Paul did not understand why. He pulled out a pack of Marlboro Reds from his coat, birthed a cheap plastic lighter into his hand from his pants pocket, and lit a cigarette. As he breathed in its cancerous smoke, he felt comfort in the burning of his lungs.

July 9th, 2008. 8:30 am. Paul pulled into the parking lot of his local 7-Eleven. He filled his car with gas and purchased an extra canister.

9:02 am. Paul arrived to work late.

"Two after? Paul, you're killing me."

"Hi peach, how's it goin' buddy?"

6:07 pm. Paul sat upon the throne of his car and waited. The last of the janitorial staff had finally filtered out the front door like red blood cells filling a scab. He took his childhood bat and stepped out of his car. Walking across the parking lot, he reflected upon his work.

I am the cancerous mass. Necrotizing, rotting. It must be burned away, Paul thought as he bashed through the front window of California Equity Trust Partners, LLC with his wooden slugger. The flimsy glass shattered and formed a mural of chaos that reflected and refracted the red alarm lights from the ceiling. Paul began dumping gasoline from a canister along the floors and walls of the front lobby before he reached the stairs. He went up to the second floor, where he worked, and doused it in more holy water. He continued this process for the remaining two floors. When he once again reached the front door, he poured a line of gasoline like a sour-smelling candle wick into the parking lot. Paul pulled his lighter out of his pocket, pressed down the rubbery button, and spun the metal wheel of fate. A flame coughed itself into existence and danced a desperate mating call for oxygen. He backed up and dropped the lighter onto the concrete ground. The fire began climbing for its life up the interior of the building, burning away the artifice of capital.

I am the salamander, beast of fire, Paul thought, *I can make things right.*

Paul looked up at the blotchy red clouds above him.

The sky is burning.

Ed

Noah David Bell

Memory's Weight

Sascha Hamilton

Memory is a capricious thing. Like love or trust. There and gone again, a shifting shadow cast against the wall at night. A rose pressed in a book, petals darkened and frail. Kept like a keepsake in the attic. Buried by time and dust.

Fixation.

On a time and place. On a feeling. The very end of summer, right when the days began to shorten, but before the warmth waned. I could go look at my journals, but I don't have the energy to open my closet door. I don't want to face the cloud of dust that will rise from the box like an apparition, ephemeral, before it settles back onto the cardboard and cheap floor beneath it.

I'm haunted enough lately.

I don't know why I remember, but I can't seem to forget. It was my last night in town before flying back west. You and me. We were going to give offering ourselves to the other a try. After a summer of illicit and troubled romance, after a year of silence.

We were in your apartment. Cool, clean, spacious. Cheap white frame bed, a string of lights woven through the frame. If memory added that detail, I couldn't check if I wanted to. Every picture of you, every picture of your room, every picture of us together, I threw them all away. Scoured every hard drive. Hit the delete key with a resigned finality. The scenes replay only in the cinema of memory now. Kesha draped in an American flag on your door, constructed from cheap brown wood, manufactured smooth and splinterless. Almost hollow feeling. I wondered if your roommate could hear every moan, every scratch, every fingernail raked down my back. Every sob. Every secret whispered.

I'm getting lost in the details, like I always do.

I don't know why I remember. I don't know why I can't forget.

My last night in town. You and me, we were in love. All dressed up. Dressed to kill. Black dress, black lace, black boots. Black jeans, black shirt, black boots. With an accented movement of your arm, graceful, almost fluttering, like a bird, you sprayed your neck with perfume before we walked out the door. The scent that seeped into my pores, that lingered on my skin for weeks at a time. I cannot draw the scent of you from the well of memory anymore. For that bitter blessing, I give thanks all to the gods above and below. A small mercy in a world that forgot how to be kind. I don't remember what we listened to on the drive. Or where we ate. Just that it was a restaurant on Haywood Road, that I am certain has long since shut its doors.

We got a table up front. Right near the window. Two lovers gazing at one another. Exultant. Glowing. Grins so wide they bore chasms into the corners of our eyes. Fingers interlacing across the table. Maybe there was a candle set down in a glass holder between us. I don't remember. Memory places the flickering flame there all the same. A metaphor. A love that burned so bright and so quick, down to the wick in a flicker of flame and swirling smoke.

Back on the street, walking hand in hand to the car. In the car. Racing towards home. The windows down. The stereo up.

"BABY, LOOK AT THE MOON!"

Gasping, you grinned, grabbed my hand. Your words hung in the air between us before settling into my skin. Thick with electric joy, with everything I ever wanted.

A half-moon hung low and yellow, and ancient. Looming large across the sky. Filling the horizon.

Looking up at the sky bathed with celestial light, I knew I was home.

You wanted to drive to the sprawling green cemetery on the hill at the edge of town. Where we could sit together just a little

longer, stretch those last hours before dawn came. Down amongst the flat, polished marble memorial stones. You wanted to watch the sky. Watch the moon as it traversed the sky from the horizon to its zenith. So near and so far above, all at once. Our skin kissed by warm yellow light. Ensconced by the mountains, beneath the moon. Together.

The wind rustled our hair on the drive. You pressed the pedal to the floor, keeping the needle of the speedometer ten miles above the speed limit all the way across town. In the passenger seat, my fingers reach across the median and spider trace your arm, leaving goosebumps in their wake. Drinking gulps of wet summer air that drown despair, I swear I have never felt this *much*.

At the edge of town, tires crunch over the gravel lot across the street. You kill the ignition; we shut the doors and run. We ran across an empty street still radiating the sun's heat. Hand in hand. Our fragile frames slipped through a rusted and wrought-iron gate. Bouncing Soles worn smooth and flat glide across wet grass. To the top of the hill. Beneath the moon. The mountains surrounding us.

I don't know why I remember. I don't know why I can't forget.

We sat on the blacktop, sharing a smoke and speaking of softer things. Your hand in mine. I could have sworn we lived this night before. Wet with spit, wet with want, pressed up against a grave. Your nails raked down my back. My face buried in your neck. Dig in. Faster in deeper. We fall further down, so soft of a sound. Pulled open in all the ways I never thought possible. Thunder pulse and the ache of want that reaches to the core. Collapse to your knees. Tears on your cheeks. I could drink an ocean's worth of you right there. Bearing witness to vulnerability so bright that it burned through our last good night.

"I love you like I swear we were part of the same entity once," you whispered.

Everything feels so *much*.

Standing beneath the moon. Surrounded by the mountains. Stark and solid contrasted against the sky. A trick of perception. For a moment, I can see every tree. Feel every life lived in the shadow of these mountains.

We lived that night before. I know it.

We lose everything, you know, lost like tears adrift in the rain. One way or another. Everything fades. To ache, or age, or skin broken by the fangs of the feigned.

I don't know why I remember.

But I know why I can't forget.

Inner Child

Jason Garrett Vickery

Selves

Laura Dame

I was a tiptoe child. Flitting through the house like a little birdie, twittering and chittering incessantly. When the camera came out, I was ready. I had the world to giggle into like a cavern, and I knew it.

I'm a 2-year-old Easter dream—cream dress, frilly socks, hat with a bow. I'm clutching a box of pink peeps with eyebrows lowered in a grump, mouth a line. It's a family picture taken by my dad. My big brothers look so small now. My momma's wearing a linen suit I always liked the feel of. We went to Sunday school as a family. I cried when I was left with Miss Peggy.

Three years old and I'm a such a little mother. I just got a new babydoll for my birthday. My face is an advertisement for satisfaction. My little lips almost as red as the jumper I've got on. I think the doggies embroidered on my turtleneck are happy too. I still know the touch of that baby's smooth head. Can still smell her sweet powdery musk.

One summer, I stood outside in the clover and violets in the rich green and buzz of the backyard. It's a life I no longer live and a girl I do not know. She's got pearly little shoulders and a striped sundress on and, in the photo, she's rolling her eyes with 4-year-old sass. She carries dances in her soul that she lets out in the sun. Her heart floats like a rainbow in sprinkler rain.

Growing up, our next door neighbor was Miss Alice. Miss Alice would sweep her porch steps daily, and I'd say hello to her

fluffy white cat: Miss Kitty. Now, I'm 21, and she's all but gone from my memory. A lullaby I can't remember but whose feelings of coziness linger like friendly phantoms. On rare days, Miss Alice would come to our house and visit with my momma's mama. Gigi, too, is being rinsed out of my brain by time.

I wonder if childhood is much more than an act of losing. Maybe God knows all the bowls of soup I slurped, all the dandelions I picked, and the laughs I giggled. I worry I'm forgetting even that which I've lost.

Ode to Dogs

Grayson Kendyl Buckner

You were born and you were mutts.

Nothing more, nothing less you were chained to the fence post.
You were formed from marred tissue, veins, and guts.
Your life (a roadkill on the rocky roaring road with potholes) spent most
On how to live in an environment that sharpens their butter knives and cuts.
Piece by piece (your bones for toothpicks) till you're served on silver plates and stain it copper rust.
You were conceived to be a tomb of howling hopes and dreams of growling ghosts.
Even God didn't want to touch you (didn't want to strangle you yet) but what's
Wrong with that? So, you made oaths
(Shaking dirty paws and grinning canines) between you and your other halves.
You shredded your sheets, cracked your mirror into divisions, and outgrew your clothes.
In the middle of night (when the moon is highest, and sky spills oil) and took down your mad paths.
Speeding down (tasting sparks and gasoline in your teeth) on the static streets blaring that old radio.
They tried to collar your throat. (They forgot you were born in blood, and you only knew bloodbaths.

That you were born in the stains, and that they **stayed**) Eventually, one day you would let it go.

But for now (you mad dumb stray)
You are dogs.
And you are biting with broken halos stuck in your jaws and feasting down on the hands of god.

I'm Mad and Not Going to the Office Anymore

April Cyr

Disclaimer: April is happily employed at A-B Tech. This Creative Non-Fiction is an expression of frustration with the end of the Pandemic Lockdown and not a reflection of Asheville Buncombe Technical Community College. A-B Tech has done an excellent job implementing online learning and allowing faculty to work remotely. Keep up the good work.

"I'm mad as hell, and I'm not going to take it anymore!"

These were the famous words of UBS Evening News anchor Howard Beale, played by Peter Finch in Sidney Lumet's *Network* (1976). "I don't have to tell you things are bad; everybody knows things are bad. First, you have to get mad. I am a human being; my life has value...." before asking the home audience watching the evening news to get up from their TVs, stick their heads out the window, and yell at God.

It's one of the most famous monologues of film history. Go look it up. It's just 4 minutes out of the billions of hours of streamed video content on the public/private domain of YouTube. Seriously, watch it now. Stop reading, and come back. I'll wait.

Forty-seven years later, what has changed? The plague of yesteryear has made hermits of many. But today, the world of hiding in my rental is roomier than ever! I can go almost anywhere in the world from the comfort of my bedroom; I can watch my favorite cartoons in Español by routing my browser through Venezuela! Rainbow people, I've never met Rainbow people on Facebook asking me for money from the confines of a Refugee Camp while they are actively hunted and discriminated for who they are. You can order a backscratcher from a manufacturer in China and have it arrive in the mail to your living room in about 3-5 business days. Many of us

live on the internet: all it takes is a smartphone, data bundles, and an electrical utility hookup.

Everything, everywhere, has gone amok, and the last few years have made hermits out of many of us. Sitting at home, as the outside world gets smaller and our computer worlds get larger, all we want to say is, "Please, at least leave us alone in our living rooms. Don't force us back into in-person appointments. Let me stay here with my leftovers, cat, and fleecy pajamas. Just leave me alone! Please don't tell me the online certification training I've been waiting over a year to attend is no longer offered virtually. You say the "COVID quota was met," and now all we're going to get is in-person crowded classrooms for a 40-hour work week?

They want the world to return to how it was before, with office culture, traffic, and compulsory attendance at company 'holiday' parties. There is no protest, riot, or letter to write to your Congressman. What would one even write? Serious question!

You could start by demanding to stay home whenever possible, i.e., during an outbreak of COVID-19 or other ~~infectious diseases~~ harmless birds. Demand that those work meetings, which could have been just emails, are just emails. The actual time spent in commuter traffic is time you should be compensated for! You're only in the mobile pod to get to work, and it's not your fault your employer's physical location is so far away!

So, I want you to get up now. I want all of you to get up out of your chairs. I want you to get up right now and go to the window. Open it, stick your head out, and yell: 'I'm as mad as hell, and I'm not gonna take this anymore!' And who knows what we might accomplish once we're out of our chairs?

Sunday

Ash Kaleb Marquis

It'd been a slow day, and I only had 15 minutes until closing, so I had gotten out the broom and come around the counter when he opened the door. He stood there shivering and staring at me.

"Can I get you something, sir?"

"I can't come in, but could I have a milkshake?"

He smelled like a back alley. I tried not to look too hard at him. "I'll have one ready for you in a few minutes."

I put up the broom and came back to the counter, and this man was still holding the door open.

"Sir, are you sure you don't want to come in a minute?"

"I would, but I don't have shoes."

"Oh I won't tell anybody."

He stalled in the doorway, but I smiled at him and started getting his drink together. The door chimed and shut.

When I came to his seat with his shake, there were bloody footprints between his booth and the door.

"That'll be six dollars at the counter whenever you're ready."

He took his time, but he did come up to me with two crumpled fives and three ones and his empty glass. He told me, "Thank you. It was just as good as I remember," and he gave me half a smile before he went, leaving more footprints for me to mop.

Honey

Molly I. Jameson

I always have felt like honey. From the moment I woke up to the moment I fell asleep. I move slowly and become malleable throughout the day. I'm sticky, so when the ants eat at me, a couple cling to me. There's this one ant named Elizabeth. She's a red ant. She eats at me the most and doesn't mind getting stuck. We met in college; I was majoring in entomology, a branch of biology that is the study of insects. She was in some kind of humanities. We both dropped out around the same time for different reasons. She realized she couldn't take the pressure, and I became overwhelmingly sick. I didn't want to get up, I felt sluggish every time I moved. I accidentally failed most of my courses and gave up on taking care of myself. I don't know how it happened. It could have been the trauma of being bullied in high school or possibly the trauma I, and I'm sure many others, faced in a biology class. Either way, I ended up here.

Thankfully I met my therapist, Dr. Chyral. Elizabeth believed she was a fake, telling me that she acts more like a drug dealer than a therapist. Every time I had a meeting with Dr. Chyral, I would hear her black loafers clanking towards the door, and then I'd see her bright yellow business suit. It had a big black belt to match her shoes, it was almost as if she had time traveled from the 90s. The pen she used to take notes had flowers on it and I swear every time she wrote I heard her buzz. She was my worker bee. She attended to me, pollinated me, solidified me. She knew exactly what I needed.

It was my second meeting with Dr. Chyral when she decided to put me on lithium, fluoxetine and Haldol. At first, they felt like they were working, but after the first month, I started to be able to pull my skin. My clothes began to stick to me once again. I could feel the sun shine right through me. Every time I felt this way, I would

slump on her couch and tell her how irritable and gooey I had been feeling.

I'd express, "And what makes it worse is that I have all the money in the world; why should I be sad? I'm rich."

She'd just *Buzz* in reply.

When she'd given me more medications, she'd waggle, telling me all the shortcuts to the pharmacy and how soon they'd be ready. She sometimes even offered to come to drop them off at my apartment.

It was quite easy getting what I needed from Dr. Chyral. All I did was I ask. Every new medication, whether it be over-the-counter or prescribed, made me sleep easier. I felt frozen in time, almost solid. But Elizabeth was still there. Every time I thought about her, I saw the bright red lipstick she wore every day. Honestly, if I had to blame anyone for the need for the medications, it would be her. After all, it's not the honey's fault for the ants getting into it.

I don't remember how Elizabeth found out I started taking these medications, but she didn't agree with my decisions. One day in my dream state, I remember she called me explaining, "Listen, I'm worried about you; maybe you should switch therapists, maybe get a different point of view. I just don't think these pills are helping you.."

I hung up on her after that. She doesn't understand what it is like to suddenly open up to a therapist and to finally get down to the root of your problems. She thinks essential oils, vitamin D, and yoga will solve my problems. She consistently would text me about these Facebook groups she'd join:

"Hey girlie! Just sent you a link to this new holistic medicine Facebook group! They seem to know what they're talking about. They have a bunch of courses on mental health and physical health and how to approach those in a natural and healthier way. Let me know what you think. Call me later, we can talk about the new *Bachelor* episode!"

I didn't message her back. I didn't even look at the group. I knew those phony middle-aged 'doctors' were just playing poker. Trying to scam the innocent. Every time she did this I felt more and more disrespected. Messages like that reminded me of how I envied her for how easily she can make herself think she's happy because of some vitamin D. Fixed by plants or the sun?

And doesn't she know that honey melts in the sun?

Most days went like that. Elizabeth would send me a few messages; I'd get upset. I would take my prescribed medication. Sleep. Wake up. Take more. Call Elizabeth to talk to her about what was new on TV, and then I forget the rest.

Tonight was different. I woke up from my third nap; I felt heavy. I went to take some Benadryl because Dr. Chyral recommended it for my allergies. Then I called Elizabeth.

"Hey, did you end up watching the new *Bachelor*? I slept through it."

"No? I'm getting ready for the party you agreed to go to."

I sat there perplexed.

"You still there?"

"Yeah. I'm just confused because I would never agree to go to a party; I haven't gone to one in years."

"You said you would go with me yesterday. And yeah, I know, that's why when you said you'd go I was surprised. You promised me."

"Listen, Lizzy, I feel really sick" *Cough Cough*, "I don't think I'll make it."

"Bullshit. I'm picking you up at 11. Get ready, or you're going in your PJs."

She hung up playfully.

10:30

My allergies started acting up, and I started itching, sweating, melting. The benadryl isn't working hard enough, so I'm taking my lithium, fluoxetine, Haldol, neurdone, phytozide, and the left-

over addrenidan Dr. Chyral dropped off, just to stay focused.

Just breathe.

10:45

All I can think about is how condescending she'll be. She's going to tell me how great she has been, or that her maid can come in and clean my apartment for me.

10:55

She'll see all my prescribed medications and think they're harmful. She'll take them. If she takes those, I won't even be able to sleep. She might even try to take my doctor away. What a pest. There wouldn't be any honey if there wasn't a bee.

Knock knock

"Hey sweets! I'm here!"

By the time I started getting into the bathroom to hide, there she was. In a bright red party dress.

Elizabeth tilted her head. "You okay? Did you start pregaming without me? Like you can barely stand up."

I came out of the bathroom with a blank stare. "No, why would I do that; I'm not even going to the party."

Elizabeth smelt of cinnamon. She seemed as if I just stepped on her hill.

"You're not looking well...Are those the pills again? I told you, your therapist is giving you way too much."

"My therapist hasn't even prescribed me enough; if she did, you wouldn't be here right now."

"I know you don't mean that, maybe you need to sit down for a minute." She tried to push me onto my vanity chair, but I slid right off.

"Can you just leave Elizabeth? You have no idea what I'm going through and haven't known for years. You and your stupid little Facebook groups need to stop. Give me my spare key and don't try to contact me again."

"Spare keys? Your door was left open."

"So you're just lying to me now? I know you have my keys!"

"Listen, you're an adult; you aren't forced to go to any kind of rehab, but I can take you to this really amazing place. It's only an hour away."

"A rehab? You're crazy to think that would work on me. You really are a red ant. All you do is come here and eat me up. You get all sticky, and then you bring every bit of stolen energy from me to your colony, don't you?"

"I... if you want me gone so badly, to the point of making up some weird scenario, I'm leaving. You know this has happened before! Don't call me when you're sleepy. I know how you are."

"Get out!" was the last thing I did to get back at Elizabeth.

Finally, her antennas showed her the way out. I felt the most euphoric then. Satisfied. Solidified. The bathroom mirror reflected the color red back at me. Sitting on top of the anthill, finally getting the rest I've so longed for.

A Reminder of Reality

Jason A. Cairens-Kelz

Behold the power of a man who drinks ever so slightly too much tea!
I curse my name and scar my flesh as I lift aloft my pen.
As my body softens and my heart shatters, I know I've reached my end.
My mind's the only thing upon which I can still depend.
But in a world of smoke and mirrors, I know my thoughts could be much clearer...
I'll find salvation yet.

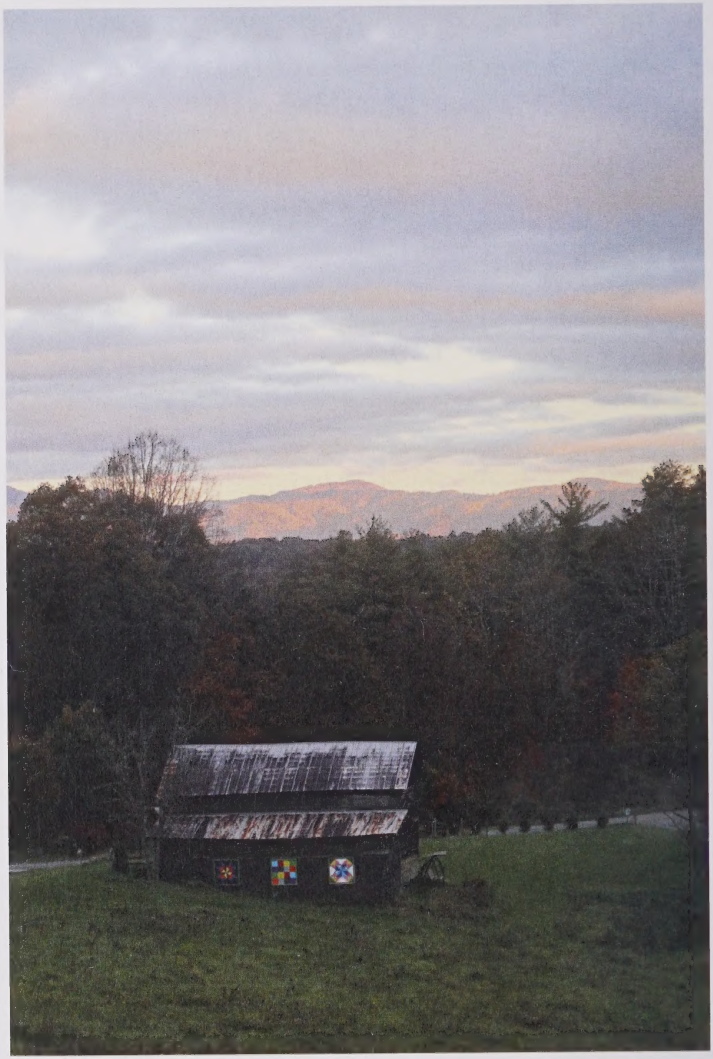
Shall I seek that which all desire, what blazes hotter than hellish fire,
What nourishes the weak and erodes the strong until they know where they belong?
To think the stars less beautiful than a flower in perpetual bloom,
clad all in virgin's wool and a coat of cheap perfume.
No, for to feel love for someone else would never help me fix myself,
And it would be wrong to ask for a date when I'm not someone she can appreciate.

Abandoning all thoughts of romance, perhaps I need to fit my pants a little better than before.
Of course! I must become stronger, pick myself up off the floor.
An honest man, a living wall, with muscles harder than stone,
None can break me, I shall be king, but a king without a throne...
People give a king his crown, so I rot here all alone,
Missing my old clever self, wishing to atone.

A body of all skin and bone,
Motivation, but I have none to spare.
So I retreat to where I belong, to find a place where I feel strong.
I rise again and live anew as my pen pierces the sky.
I do not know for what I fight, but I refuse to die.
Can't hurt the ones who love me.
I'll see the sun another day.

Barn Quilts

Jason Garrett Vickery



Green Juices

Mark Damon Puckett

we blew
grass kazoos
between
our thumbs
chewed
the blades
spat
green juice
like men

adults were big
in our eyes–
over a barn door
Dad crushed
forty red wasps
between thick
work gloves
that smelled like
diesel, hay

Grandma Puckett
was tall
she saved
my older brother
from a snake
hissing on
the gravel road
beating it

away with
a wooden spoon
in a colorful dress

black snakes
dropped on
our heads
from trees
by our house
sliding
into the kitchen
during dinner
Dad grabbed them
by the neck
and flung them
into the yard
they looked
like cursive
in the air

shirtless
with machetes
we hacked
off leaves
in the summer
long green
stalks
bundled, hauled
to the creek–
Grandpa Puckett
in overalls
fed them into
a turning red mill

green juice
fell into buckets
dumped
over an eight-foot
pan that looked
like a metal maze–
white foam
skimmed
from the top
by grown-ups

soon, gold and
brown and warm
molasses glistened
on the other
side of the pan
poured into
mason jars
sold in town
two dollars a pint
four a quart
eight a half-gallon
sixteen a gallon
i miss the molasses

Dee Dee Is an Outsider

Jack B. Clements

The third track off 1983's *Subterranean Jungle*, "Outsider" is my favorite Ramones song right now. I am in love with this song for many reasons. First, the trifecta of a Ramones song — traditionally bleak, beautifully childish, and simply pop — hits all cylinders for the entire 2:11 runtime. Second, upon its discovery, this song — as well as its album *Subterranean Jungle* — kindly reminded me NOT to underestimate the fascinating nature of 80s Ramones. Yes, this era did not give us *Rocket to Russia* or the self-titled *Ramones*, or *It's Alive*, but it still has many addictive, bubbly, and engrossing moments. Third, this era saw a band seeking higher quality production — starting with psychotic genius producer Phil Spector, a band still firmly rooted in their worthwhile sound and lyrics but also delivering a relevant, distinctive '80s subtext — a shining example being "Bonzo Goes to Bitburg", and a band that still seems to enjoy their creative collaboration. However, the oh-so- biggest reason I fell in love with "Outsider" — Dee Dee on pen and pad, Joey on leading vocals, Marky on drums, Johnny on guitar, and Dee Dee again on bass and backing vocals — is the solo verse on the track, Dee Dee's verse.

At 1:05, Marky's drum fill parts the overcast, the sun comes out, and Dee Dee's verse begins:

All messed up, hey everyone
I have already had all my fun
More troubles are going to come
I have already had all my fun
Ooh yeah, yeah, yeah

Reads simply and straight-forward, grim but compelling, sonically smoothing and audibly drooling. It is so brief that you re-

wind it like 20 times to hear its angelic nature that proverbial one last time. It gives a just-enough further analysis of Dee Dee's emotions and well-being that it solidifies the already honest, cynical wounds of the choruses.

Moreover, a Ramones' verse sung so audibly and melodically clear by — not Joey — Dee Dee is a rarity leading up to this album, especially. Other than "53rd and 3rd," I cannot think when I audibly recognize Dee Dee's vocals pre-1983; however, *Subterranean Jungle* and the 80s in general saw an increase in Dee Dee leading vocals on verses and sometimes even tracks like *Too Tough to Die*'s rather archaic "Warthog" and like my second favorite track off *Subterranean Jungle*, "Time Bomb."

Nevertheless, Joey is almost always the melodic vessel for Dee Dee's words, so Dee Dee stepping up to deliver his written vulnerability himself conveys the personal significance of "Outsider" and its subtext. This verse is everything I have said and more. This verse is the analysis, elaboration, climax, and reason. This verse is why "Outsider" is a great song. The intentionally superficial choruses allow for Dee Dee to come in and deliver the actual blow. Dee Dee's verse is the blood, guts, heart, and soul of "Outsider." In the end, however, the verse is just an instant. Dee Dee ends with a confirmation of his emotional statement. And just like that, clouds gather and skies darken. Joey's second chorus jolts you back to the surface, and shortly afterwards, Joey's main chorus pours into a fading close.

"Outsider" is beautiful, joyous, confusing, emotional, and clashing. "Outsider" is a juxtaposition, just like all the great Ramones songs. I am sure there will be a new "Outsider" sooner or later, but right now I can't get enough of it, and I am totally fine with that. Despite my own demons that make me feel like that same unworthy societal outcast of humanity that Dee Dee personally writes and sings of in this track, "Outsider" always makes me feel cathartically worthy, accepted, and loved. Nearly six months after

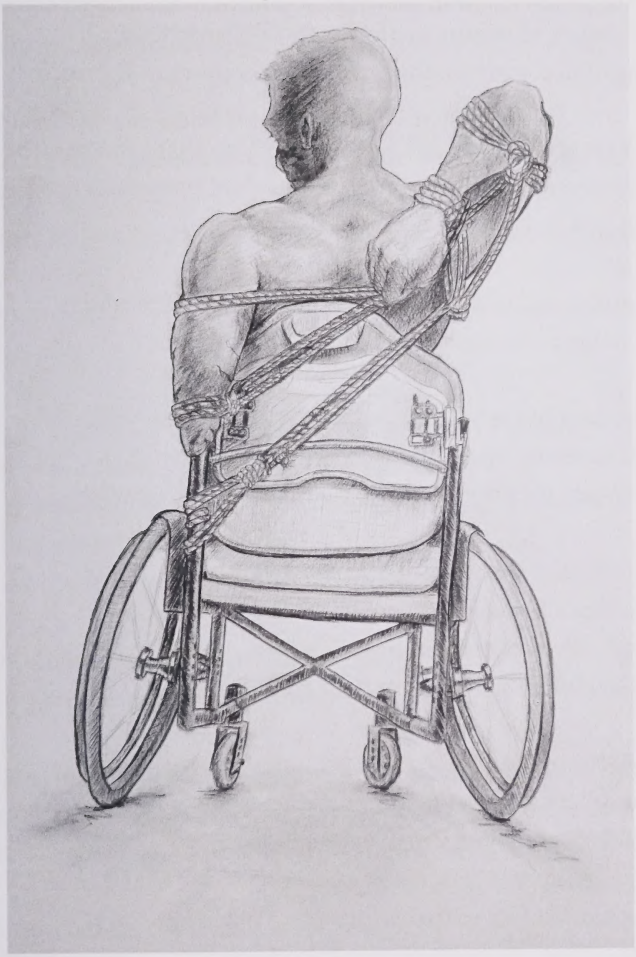
discovering "Outsider," I still rewind at least once each listen for that magical, euphoric moment. I have NOT had all my fun with it. It remains enchanting to me.

Thanks to the r/ramones and r/punk subreddit communities for providing additional, clarifying information and research. Also, thanks to the compilation album *Ramones Mania* for existing, because that is where, amid a shuffle, I discovered "Outsider."

Rest In Power Dee Dee, Rest In Power Joey, Rest In Power Tommy, Rest In Power Johnny.

PolyTrauma

Tristan Callahan



Children of the World

Chadwick M. Beattie

The children of the world sculpt origami doves
out of recycled newspaper,
dissecting earthworms on the graffiti'd playgrounds,
trading dialects within the orchestra of suburban culture

They feast on cardboard lunches with shoes that remain untied,
mouths covered in cookie crumbs that shed from their lips like star matter

Their ecosystems are in order like ducks in a grocery line
like a string of dominoes along rigid train tracks

The children of the world have created miniature battle fields
within ancestral visions of meteor stricken cities,
unapologetic to the whispers of wind, fire, and snowfall

The children of the world don't remember
their father's torn and slender body displayed publicly
amongst a field of scarecrows, rib bones
bent like melted spoons beneath a pale torso

The children of the world don't remember
their mother's still, unmoving breath,
the cradled infancy of wombed rebellion
and the surrendering opera of white bedsheets that dance
in slow motion like rusted figurines

The children of the world have abandoned their cell cycles,

have succumbed to the mitosis of spirit
that gravitates them in virtuous orbit,
growing cheerlessly toward kicked over
trash cans and stale marijuana spliffs,
toward mechanical values that churn
the descending wheels of longing into scattered earth,
condensed by obturated ozones within clouds of car exhaust
that expedite the imperial fetish of polluted skies

The children of the world are troubled, perhaps doomed,
because their childhood swings have been lacerated with bolt cutters
and their forests bulldozed and their homes replaced with snide condominiums
by the instruction of obsolete men who have never stained their suits

The light is growing dim inside the children of the world
as they reach out for guidance,
and are rewarded with petroleum-infused oxygen in return,
and their peers have no money, nor gold, only a hand
that has often forgotten to feed its rabid mouth

The children of the world are not yet dead,
but they are slowly and unwillingly dying

They are Judas dragging rubber tires across snake carcass rivers,
shape-shifting to pass the time as they stare monotonously
into reflective canyons of shadowed mannequins

The future lies on the children of the world
and we are robbing them of fulfilling their duties
Like galloping horses who have abandoned their barns

the children of the world run free from obstacle,
free from restraint, and free from synthetic gravity

And now it is time for us to attend
to that which will carry us when we fall

Leaking

Jameson E. Phelps

Rock Bottom

Joseph H. Adams

Rock-bottom is an undertow
That drags and scrapes me
Along the cruel grueling floor
Until I have no sense of up nor down
Only knowing a dizzy, nauseating tumble
And the need for air

I am beached
The sand kisses me like an abuser
Comfort is contrasting levels of pain
Lying in exhausted unrest
I am hungry
I am tired
I am done

The tide comes
And sweeps me out from shore
Like a rag, I drift
Unaware and unable
The sun feels like a burden
That leaves me longing for a cold, dark abyss
Where, at least, I am familiar

As I drowned, I dreamt
Safe, at home, in bed
Far from any ocean
With two cats like life guards
Who check my vital signs
Offer warmth
And seem to sense my need

It's a funny balance
Between feeling what I need to feel
And recognizing truth for what it is
I exclaim, "I need trust, love, and stability!"
I imagine that God says the same
And that, together, we are codependent and sad

I will feed the cats

Remember Me Back

Tiffany Faith Narron

If I somehow forget who I am
in some sort of tragic remembering accident,
sit me outside on a cool October morning
to remember me back.

Let the wet of the browned and yellowed leaves fall at my feet
and re-mother me into time once more.
Place offerings of honey water
and heart-shaped wild potato vine
all along the length of my body.
Let the baby brown finch parade
prance along my arms and mess my hair.

If I've forgotten who I am in some sort of
tragic remembering accident,
hum that old hymn "I'll Fly Away" gently into my ear.
Tap your toe along the top of mine.
Let the vibration carry me
far across the shadows of experience
and back into the collective womb from which we're all carried.
Under the ocean floor, my granular sand body
will be washed once more
alongside the generational sands of time.

Please don't worry if I somehow forget who I am
in some sort of tragic remembering accident.
Gather sticks of oak and maple, fallen walnuts,
and dried leaves to build a small fire at my side.

Lay me down easy alongside its deep warmth
and trust it will burn me back into my ancient form.
Let the fire catch hold of my hair
and consume the flesh from my bones.
Knowing that a seed cannot be burned away from existence,
only nurtured back into the origin from whence it was born.

Popcorn Ceiling

Miles B. Gast

You pack your bag in front of me, obscenities streaming from your mouth like a waterfall. Some of your clothes and most of mine are stuffed into the small duffel, and I stare blankly at the beige popcorn ceiling. The door slams behind you as you walk away, leaving nothing but a silver ring on the nightstand. The ceiling looks so familiar, and I can't quite explain why. Maybe it was some memory I had kept tucked away, maybe it was the memory I am making now, but I can't describe it. It's almost four in the morning now, so I stand up. You'll be back tomorrow, you always are. I walk over to the kitchen and begin the daily sweep. Glass shards litter the floor from our last fight; you threw bottles of wine and empty pints at me until you were satisfied. I finally bought that new trash can, just for these cleanups. The glass from the dustpan crashed loudly at the bottom of the bin, shattering into millions of pieces more fractured than us.

The sun is rising now, must be about 6:00. The stove sparks on, burning at a beautiful medium-high heat as I lower the cast iron skillet to the flame. I crack two eggs into the pan after a bit of olive oil. Sunny-side up, the way you like them. The coffee timer dings as the pot finishes brewing, and I pour myself a mug. The pot sits next to a picture of us, some ten years ago, before you got sick. It's of us in a field of flowers, you happily holding onto my shoulders and smiling. You stopped smiling about five years ago. That must be one of the only pictures I have of you before the diagnosis; you broke all the other ones in your last fit. I sip on the coffee, enjoying the quiet for a moment. Checking my watch, I realize you will be back soon, covered in mud and apologies, and I'll forgive you, as always, and you will leave again tonight. The egg timer goes off, so I walk back into

the kitchen. I remove the eggs delicately from the pan, placing them on a slice of bread. I grab the rest of the coffee and put it in your mug, your favorite mug, and place them on the table. Your medicine is already there. The doctors said that they are supposed to steady your mood, to make you feel less sick after chemo, etcetera etcetera. It never really worked.

It must have been three years ago, after the flowers and the smiles had all faded, when you stopped being my partner. Something about you broke on that day, your second diagnosis. I'm supposed to be optimistic, to be happy for you, you've lived two years longer than they all expected. Your parents would call you every night, crying and hoping to hear you sound somewhat happy. They stopped a year ago and haven't called since. I guess it was just too much for them. Right at 6:30, someone knocks on our door. The eggs are ready, the coffee is ready, the meds are ready, and your smiling face in the picture frame anxiously awaits your arrival at the door. I remember that day so well, the flower field. We were young and broke, fresh out of college. You went for computer science, and I went for engineering; we had dreams of starting a company together and working our asses off to get some real money. It never launched, and you worked an IT job you hated for years, and I worked as a city planner for years. We both hated our jobs, and both dreamt about our little company together, but it never happened. But on that day, none of that mattered. Not our college, not our plans, not our future, but us. It was us, sitting in that little flower field, eating some mediocre sandwiches you had managed to steal from your office's lounge. We laughed and sat there until the sun set. You made fun of me for shivering the moment the sun dropped from the sky. You shivered soon after, so I laughed as well.

This stranger knocks on our door again, waking me up from my daydream. I open it, to find a confused face that looks like you painted in the usual suspects. Tears stream down their face as this stranger rushes to embrace me. They cry and apologize, looking

around our home frantically and confused. They sit down at our table, the one we made together with your parents, and eat on it as if it were their own. The breakfast I made just for you is devoured by this hungry stranger at our table. And that's when I remember.

The house we made together, the small one outside of town, a few miles away from this apartment. We worked for a few years before we could barely afford the mortgage, but we didn't care. It was our foundation, our legacy, you said. It was big enough to have our kids live in with us, much to my dismay. You always laughed at me for that, saying that it wasn't like I had to do much anyway. We finished the house together a few months later. I remember laying on our new bed, waiting for you to come out of the bathroom, looking up at the ceiling. Popcorn. I don't know how you managed to convince me to install it; the plaster balls are ugly and expensive, but you said it looked like stars. I laughed at your rampant cliché but agreed nevertheless. I loved you to the ends of the Earth.

I waited for you to leave that bathroom, and you did, eventually. You came back, coughing up blood, before passing out onto the newly-varnished floors. I carried you to my car and drove you to the hospital as you faded in and out of consciousness. That night, they ran the tests and the MRI and told us about your tumor, the one growing to be massive in your lung. We cried together that night, all the way into the morning. We sold the house to pay for your new guest's prompt removal, but it went nowhere. So now, I sit, watching a stranger eat my breakfast for you. You will never come back through our door, and you will never eat at our table again. All I have now is a husk of the person I knew and loved, who sits at our table, with millions of miles of space between us. All I have now is a popcorn ceiling that reminds me of the stars we saw in the flower field.

Evening's Dance

Hannah Gregory

Autobiography of July

Laura Dame

I watch the rain tickle
the windows and I make
cinnamon-heavy French toast, singe it a little
so the whole apartment smells sweet,
and Joni Mitchell cries in folk
and I have my river to skate away on
but I find space to think about you in all
the in-betweens and even in the in-betweens
of those in-betweens

I dip my toes in peach wine,
read novels, give birth to poetry
(for the sake of relief not creation)
and dance to Carole King late at night
before crying over coming of age movies
but somehow you're still the taste in my mouth
I can't giggle enough to get rid of you

I take walks when the sun sets, after
the spiders come out, in the rain
and in the lightning—get eaten alive
by bugs and sweat my clothes wet through
boil pasta and eat it with lots of cheese, sing along
with Peggy Lee like I can croon pretty too
and watch sitcoms until it's time to sleep
and then I sleep sleep *sleep in*
but you're always so not around that you've overstayed

This morning, I pulled the next book off the shelf.
I'm learning about the art of regret, taking a hiatus
From loss. I buy flowers for myself and when I laugh
I lean into it like the cat pushes its chin against my hand.
Life is a romance. When I breathe, I kiss away my sad.
I'm alone with Ella Fitzgerald—
soon I'll be walking in the sun once more.

That Night in Your Bedroom

Georgia Mrozkowski

After, the condensation lingered on my skin.
In the damp heat of your bedroom,
It licked me, pulled my hair, a blistering fever
In that dark, dripping cavern: My prison.

In the damp heat of your bedroom,
The pilling flannel sheets writhed onward
In that dark, dripping cavern. In this prison,
Life was conquered, relics were destroyed.

The pilling flannel sheets writhed onward.
In your bedroom, I reached for my purse, my pearls, my pants.
Life was conquered, relics were destroyed,
When the flowing black tar ordained my face like the decapitated Buddhas.

In your bedroom, I reached for my purse, my pearls, my pants.
This imperial poaching deemed appropriate by some divine
When the flowing black tar ordained my face like the decapitated Buddhas.
My body succumbed to the iron fist.

The divine deemed this imperial poaching appropriate,
When cruel hands extinguished all incandescence.
My body succumbed to the iron fist,
After, only condensation on my skin.

The Carpenter Killed the Cat

Willow B. Garrison

The carpenter killed the cat
Tongue dipped in diamond sugar,
Spilling fabricated fantasies onto ears of
Wide eyed innocence,
Feigning ignorance.
Orchid poured poison,
Blood curdling blooms seep into ear
Through ear.

The dust jacket is different from the cat's actual cover,
And the carpenter clearly,
Truly,
Really,
Loves her.
The carpenter never tries to hide
His huge Humbert Humbert honorless
Grin.

The cat grins back.
The cat that grins back.
This cat killed Carol in his sleep.
This cat wages war through
Disease,
Wit,
Woe,
And deceit.

The carpenter killed the cat.
What's death if you're just a pet?
Can the carpenter keep up his faux charm
Act?
How long will his act last?
Certainly it will end before *her* last act.

This cat is killed.
If this cat is killed who keeps
the carpenter from killing again;
Keep him from grinding his putrid yellowing grin?
The carpenter killed the cat,
But the cat always comes back.

The cat comes back.
The cat that comes back.
Never underestimate the cunning of the cat,
That the carpenter killed in cold blood,
With orchid poured poison,
And lakes of sweet diamond melodies
That he moved from ear
To ear.
Innocence to fear.
Certainly the carpenter's a predator,
But who's the prey?
Who's the real hunter here?

Perhaps the cat.
The cat underneath the dust jacket,
Feigning ignorance to poison laced blooms from ear to ear.
This cat that grins back, who killed Carol in his sleep,
Who wages war with
Disease,

Wit,
Woe,
And deceit.
The cunning cat who never truly has a last act.
The cat that comes back-
Back
Back.
Back.

Or the carpenter
who killed the cat?

Contributors

Joseph H. Adams

Joseph is a multi-genre artist who often turns his poems into songs. He is a dancer, graphic artist, musician, sculpter, and more. This particular poem is a reflection on what can be the darkest of times. Joseph is pursuing higher education to support his arts in education initiatives.

Michelle L. Appollo

Michelle is a first semester student and a full time CNA. She loves to learn about writing.

Chadwick M. Beattie

Chadwick is a musician, writer, and poet from Baltimore, MD, now residing in Asheville. For the past decade, he has performed prepared hammered dulcimer, violin/synth soundscapes, as well as country-inspired verse/chorus songs under the pseudonym Yes Selma. He enjoys his work with kids and adults with autism and is pursuing a degree in occupational therapy.

Noah David Bell

Noah's parents were full time artists and musicians. When he was 7 and his brother was 5, they took them out of school to go on tour. After years on the road, he had one conclusion. It's no place for kids!

Grayson Kendyl Buckner

Grayson is a full time student who usually writes poetry or day dreams in their free time. He's an avid reader doing his best to try and pass class and live to his true self, whatever that may be.

Jason A. Cairens-Kelz

Jason is a part-time college student who writes short fiction and, on rare occasions, poetry.

Tristan Callahan

Tristan is a full-time student in his last semester of Computer Engineering Technology. He has been known to sneak off to art classes when his advisor wasn't looking. Tristan was a machine gunner, radio technician, and trauma first-responder in Afghanistan with the 5th Marines.

Emily E. Carter

Emily is a teacher, writer, advisor, globe-trotter, and lifetime learner. When she's not chasing down her mischievous sons, she enjoys yoga, hiking, cycling, reading and creating fiction.

Victoria R. Cavanaugh

Vic is a DME student from Candler, NC. She enjoys hiking and exploring.

Jack B. Clements

Jack is a student at A-B Tech seeking an Associate of Arts on the English pathway. Jack finds much joy and benefit in reading and writing.

April Cyr

April is full-time student and part-time Lab Assistant at A-B Tech who wants to make online learning spaces better and more accessible to the people who need them.

Laura Dame

Laura is a soon-to-be Furman University graduate with a BA in English. Her work has appeared in *The Rhapsodist* and *The Echo*.

Maxwell Faustus

Maxwell is a part-time student and full-time daydreamer. They love vampires, Victoriana, and all other oddities.

Willow B. Garrison

Willow was born and raised in the Blue Ridge Mountains. From an early age, She has been fascinated by the strange and macabre, with some of her favorite authors/ illustrators being Edward Gorey and Junji Ito. She'd like to let you know that if she ever dips her does into the pool of drag, her drag name would be "Cadavra."

Miles B. Gast

Miles is a full-time student balancing his creative writing in his downtime. He primarily focuses on poetry and short stories.

Hannah Gregory

A renaissance woman—Hannah majored in Biology and minored in Chemistry at UNCA. She is currently in the Med-Lab Tech program at A-B Tech. She searches for the intersection of science and visual/linguistic art through drama production, poetry, painting, reading, and ceramics.

Sascha Hamilton

Sascha lives alone with their dog in a small house in rural Western North Carolina. They are a punk rock lifer, a product of the subculture through and through. They write because they love it it, and punk rock taught them to use their voice. They possess little tact or social graces and humbly ask for forgiveness if they ever hurt your feelings.

Frank Henry

Frank is a former screenwriter who turned to fiction during the COVID pandemic in 2020. He is currently a student of English but hopes to transfer into a program for Slavic Language and Literature. He is also working on his first novel and hopes to release it in 2024.

Molly I. Jameson

Molly is a fourth-year Early College student graduating in the spring of 2022. She is new to creative writing, and this is her first short story.

Clay N. Jones

Clay is an employee at the A-B Tech bookstore and part time student studying for a certification to teach English as a foreign language. She received a degree in English Literature from Appalachian State University, and in her free time loves to write, draw, study Japanese, and watch movies.

Ash Kaleb Marquis

Ash is a fourth-year Early College student. He is passionate about literature and is always looking to learn more about writing.

Bronwen McCormick

Bronwen works in the Culinary department as an Instructor and Lab Manager. She spends her free time in the amazing WNC outdoors and attempts to do them justice in watercolor.

James Z. Mimken

James is a library science student with a passion for writing.

Georgia Mrozkowski

Georgia is a dual-enrolled student at A-B Tech. She is a multi-instrumentalist and songwriter. Most of her work touches on subjects that revolve around being a young woman.

Tiffany Faith Narron

Tiffany writes what she calls poetic narrative, allowing the everyday flow of life to fuse with symbology, ritual, folklore, and deep spiritual reverence in nature. The dreamlike prose that emerges holds yearnings of the spirit and prayers that capture the delicate details of this living, interweaving them into self and our shared collective journey.

Jameson E. Phelps

Jameson is a high school student that is dual enrolled at AB-Tech. She enjoys creating all kinds of art, as it is a sort of catharsis. She also hopes to major in Aerospace Engineering at a four-year university this upcoming fall.

Victor Phillips

Victor (he/him) is a full-time student who writes short stories.

Mark Damon Puckett

Mark has been teaching writing at A-B Tech for 9 years. His artwork has sold in ElectricCo Gallery in Virginia--and he has done commissions all over the country. His art and his books can be found on markdamonpuckett.com.

Kari Richmond

Kari is enjoying taking classes again after 25 years away from college. She's working toward entrance in the Occupational Therapy Assistant program. Watercolor painting has been a fun way to spend time with her mom during the holiday break.

Harrison J. Street

Harrison is an electronics technician that repairs/restores musical instruments and is fascinated by the mechanics of vintage instruments. There are so many small working parts that function together to make the instrument whole. Old analog film cameras peak my interest in the same way. The mechanics of a vintage camera are beautiful, and the images they capture reflect that.

Jason Garrett Vickery

Jason is a multimedia artist pursuing his AFA degree from A-B Tech.

Kennon Webber

Kennon works at the A-B Tech Bookstore. He has lived in Asheville, NC for the last two decades. Before moving to the mountains, he lived in San Francisco's North Beach neighborhood.

Benjamin Ernest Zeidell

Ben is a part-time student in the aviation program. He worked three years in the medical field prior to COVID and left the field to pursue his lifelong dream of becoming a pilot. He currently works full-time as a CDL driver, delivering waterworks supplies to local municipalities and contractors. He lives with his wonderful fianceé, Anna, in West Asheville.

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